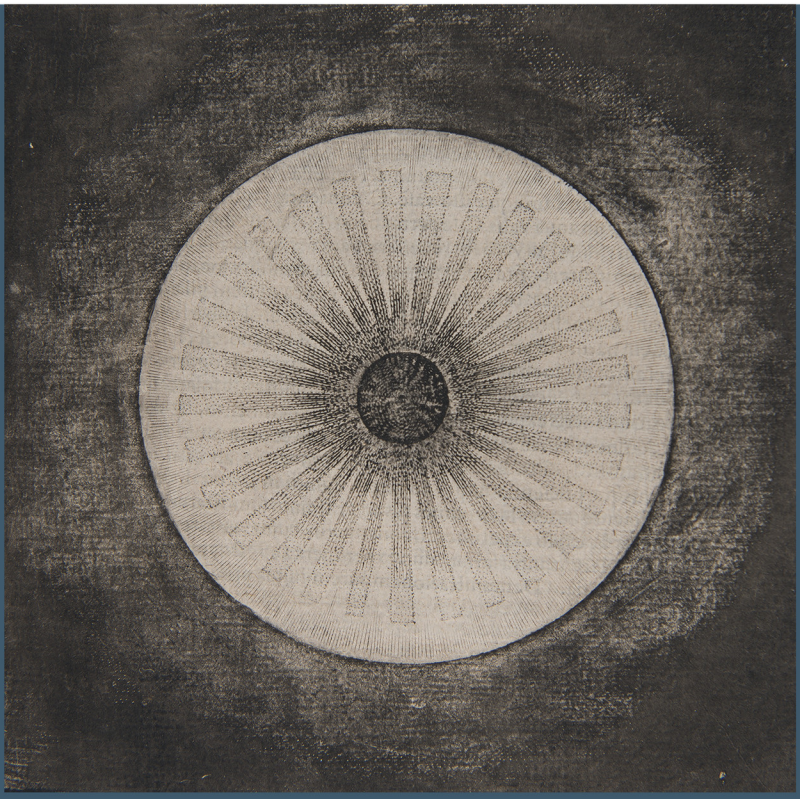
Philosophic Silence and the 'One' in Plotinus

Nicholas Banner



PHILOSOPHIC SILENCE AND THE 'ONE' IN PLOTINUS

Plotinus, the greatest philosopher of late antiquity, discusses at length a first principle of reality – the One – which, he tells us, cannot be expressed in words or grasped in thought. How and why, then, does Plotinus write about it at all? This book explores this act of writing the unwritable. Seeking to explain what seems to be an insoluble paradox in the very practice of Late Platonist writing, it examines not only the philosophical concerns involved, but the cultural and rhetorical aspects of the question. The discussion outlines an ancient practice of 'philosophical silence' which determined the themes and tropes of public secrecy appropriate to Late Platonist philosophy. Through philosophic silence, public secrecy and silence flow into one another, and the unsaid space of the text becomes an initiatory secret. Understanding this mode of discourse allows us to resolve many apparent contradictions in Plotinus' thought.

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Preface

The present volume is a study of a recondite aspect of Plotinus' philosophy: his use of tropes of secrecy and silence in his discussions of the nature of his ineffable first principle. Recondite and perhaps obscure, but not unimportant: because Plotinus tells us that the One cannot be spoken of – writes that the One cannot be written about – the tropes of secrecy and silence cast a kind of shadowy paradox over his entire project. Plotinus tells us many things about the One, only to contradict them later, often denying that he can tell us anything about it at all, and if one were to arrive at a clear-cut conclusion from all this, it ought to be that Plotinus, by his own admission, should not be writing. The One, for Plotinus, is utterly 'silent' and the philosopher should seek to emulate this silence. And yet, were Plotinus to have kept silent, there would be no one to tell us of the need to keep silent about the One.

It has been noted that reading apophatic language or 'negative theology' can be a fairly agonising process, and any work which has apophasis as its theme tends to be agonising in direct proportion to its fidelity to the subject matter. The present work, it is hoped, treads an elusive middle path between self-negating obscurity and facile 'explanation' which enables some new insights into Plotinus' practice of written silence but is also somewhat readable. The goal has been to explore and describe some of Plotinus' techniques of written silence in an intelligible way without straying too far from the intrinsically mind-bending difficulty of the subject matter. The author craves the reader's indulgence for the many points at which the text falls too far in one direction or the other.

This book also treads a line between over-specialisation and general treatment. The discussion inevitably covers quite a bit of ground which has been treated elsewhere, in the interests of giving a reasonably complete overview of the subject matter. Plotinian specialists may thus find themselves frustrated by a certain amount of well-discussed material being

covered (not the three primary hypostases *again*!), while there is still a danger that novices will find themselves adrift in a strange thought-world. My reading of Plotinus militates for a strong connection between Plotinian ontology and epistemology, which necessitates more metaphysics than one might expect in a book primarily about Plotinus' writing practice. It is hoped that experienced readers will know where to skip judiciously ahead, and that newcomers to Plotinus' philosophy will be inspired to seek further rather than put off by any bafflement they experience in the course of reading this book.

Thanks are due to a host of benevolent people and institutions, but I limit myself to citing the most crucial. First and foremost, thanks are due to Katya for her inexhaustible forbearance and inspiration, and to Lulu for her daily demonstrations of what Plotinus must have meant by *noêsis*. The original thesis from which this book evolved was deftly shepherded into existence by Professor Christopher Gill, whose approach combines a rare balance of lightness of touch and incisive criticism. To scholars and friends who offered comments and inspiration, whether intentionally or by accident, my thanks are heartfelt even if I do not name you here; to name some would be inevitably to overlook others, to the detriment of all. Such errors and omissions which remain in this book are of course my own.

Abbreviations

CH	*Corpus Hermeticum*
DK	Diels-Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*
H + S 1	Henry and Schwyzer, eds., *Plotini opera*, *editio maior* (Paris/Brussels 1951–1973)
H + S 2	Henry and Schwyzer, eds., *Plotini opera*, *editio minor* (Oxford 1964–1983)
LSJ	Liddel, Scott and Jones, *Greek English Lexicon*
NF	Nock and Festugière 1947
NHC	Nag Hammadi Corpus
OLD	*Oxford Latin Dictionary*
PG	*Patrologia Graeca*, Migne 1857–1866
SVF	*Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (Arnim 1905–1924)
W	Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles: Texte und Kommentar*

Introduction

> Plotinus has only one thing to say . . . and yet, he never will say it.
> Hadot, 1993

The present study is an enquiry into 'philosophic silence' in Plotinus.[1] The line of enquiry pursued arose from wonder at a seeming paradox: Plotinus posits a radical truth available to the philosophic seeker, a truth that is an ontological transformation as much as it is an epistemological attainment, but refuses to *speak* this truth, and denies that it may be spoken. Why, then, write about it? The ineffable nature of the One or Good for Plotinus, coupled with what may be termed its transcendence and immanence at all levels of being and knowing, naturally gives rise to this tension between utterance and silence.

Plotinus also positions himself as an exegete of an esoteric philosophic tradition, with a concern for keeping certain philosophic matters out of the hands of the vulgar crowd. He claimed a great reluctance to write and publish his philosophy. Yet publish he did, as well as teaching a philosophic seminar open to all, and to questions from every quarter. How should we account for these apparent contradictions?

The most common account of Plotinus' use of the intensive negative language known as apophasis, of the rhetorics of silence and secrecy and of the paradoxes of transcendence and immanence, is that all these techniques are legitimate philosophical responses to the ineffable first principle of later Platonism. Viewed from the perspective of the philosophic history of ideas, Plotinian paradox and indeed what is widely termed Plotinian 'mysticism'

[1] References to the text of the *Enneads* are to the *editio maior* of Henry and Schwyzer (1951–1973), by *Ennead*, treatise [chronological number] chapter and line(s). Any otherwise unattributed references are to the *Enneads*; for other primary sources the abbreviation conventions of Liddell and Scott's revised *Greek–English Lexicon* (Oxford 1996) and Glare's *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford 2000) are followed. Abbreviations of periodical titles are those of the *Année Philologique*. Translations are the author's own unless noted.

arise from Middle and Late Platonist[2] hermeneutics of Platonic premises, and are simply logical.[3] Since the publication in 1928 of Dodds' seminal 'The *Parmenides* of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonist One', the dominant tendency in Classical scholarship has been to regard the rise of the transcendent first principle in Platonism, and particularly in Plotinus, as an outcome of exegesis primarily of the Platonic dialogues and secondarily of other Greek philosophical materials, particularly of Aristotle and the commentary tradition.[4] The intellectual history which has emerged, painted in broad strokes, describes a more or less linear progression toward an idea of a first principle which, whether it is an intellect, a monad, or something else, surpasses being and essence.[5] The 'Good beyond being' of *Republic* 509b8-9, the 'beautiful itself' of *Symposium* 210e2-211b3, the 'One beyond being' of *Parmenides* 142a3-4 and many other passages read in the light of these, provided exegetical materials for interpreters of Plato seeking the primordial first principle, and contributed to their setting it, in an absolute sense, *beyond*.[6] It 'makes sense' that the Good, conceived through exegesis of Plato's dialogues as 'beyond being'[7] and subject to paradoxical conditions in its relationship to the manifest world, is beyond normal

[2] This book prefers 'Late Platonism' to the almost universal 'Neoplatonism'. While a strong case can be made for retaining the use of a term which refers to a well-defined set of thinkers who share certain distinctive characteristics of thought, it is felt that the 'Neo-' of 'Neoplatonism' smuggles certain polemics of modern scholarship into discussion (to do with modern readings of Plato opposed to ancient ones), which it is as well to avoid. Plotinus and his successors were in many ways closer to Plato than any modern interpreters can hope to be. The questions of what we as scholars mean by Platonism more fundamentally, and how the Platonist Plotinus defined himself, are discussed (p. 253 ff.). For critical discussion of the modern term 'Neoplatonism', see Gatti 1996 (22–24); cf. Zambon 2002 (23–28); Athanassiadi 2006 (23–26). As Catana 2013 rightly argues, the Middle- and Neoplatonist divide is also a modern and artificial one; this book uses the term 'Middle Platonist'. for the sake of convenience, but it should be understood as referring only to a recognised historical period rather than implying any claims about doctrine. Scholarship has long since eroded the solid doctrinal lines once erected between the two eras of Platonist thought.

[3] See p. 147 ff. The present work takes 'Platonist' to refer to the Græco–Roman philosophical movement beginning in roughly the first century CE (see p. 255), and 'Platonic' to refer only to Plato's own work and to the Platonic Epistles, regardless of their actual authorship.

[4] Especially important for this book are Charrue 1978; Dillon 1992 (192–193); Eon 1970; Mortley 1972, 1975, 1982, 1986; Whittaker 1969b, 1971, 1973 and Festugière 1981, esp. vol. IV, all of which refine our understanding of the intellectual genealogy of the ineffable transcendent within the history of Platonism and Neopythagoreanism.

[5] Important general approaches to this development include Dodds 1928; Dörrie 1960; Aubenque 1971; Festugière 1981 IV (6–140, esp. 6–17); Mortley 1986 I (125–148). Burns 2004 (44–49) presents a succinct summary of much of the material covered in the present section.

[6] See generally Festugière 1981, 79–91. For a discussion of Pl. *R.* with regard to the transcendent in Middle Platonism, see Whittaker 1969a; on *Smp.* see Festugière 1981 IV (79–81).

[7] For the Good ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας in Plato (possible translations include 'beyond essence', 'beyond being' and 'beyond substance') see especially *R.* 509B 8–9; *Prm.* 142A 3–4. and Chapters 5 and 6 in this volume. This book favours 'being' as a translation for οὐσία, but this should be understood as a term of art, defined more thoroughly at p. 181.

human thought and discourse.[8] While this is a perplexing and problematic aspect of Plotinian philosophy, it is one which has been addressed with considerable success in twentieth-century scholarship.[9]

The further problem which arises from this first, namely the paradox of Plotinus' extensive *writing* about this unwritable 'subject', is the central impetus for the present inquiry. We may conclude, based on the premises and arguments found in the *Enneads*, that it makes sense for Plotinus to define his first principle as ineffable, and we may even assent to his extensive writings on the subject, on the grounds that he is attempting to explain the ineffable nature of the One as far as possible. But Plotinus does not simply define the One with a kind of written silence which aims to show the absence from the text of the subject of discourse; he also describes it using rhetorics of *secrecy*. The Plotinian One is described as both self-hiding by its very nature, and in need of concealment from those 'uninitiated' in the mysteries of philosophy. Why should Plotinus desire to defend the highest philosophical achievement, the direct encounter with the One, with secrecy, if it is by its very nature incommunicable?

Previous scholarship has occasionally touched on this paradox, but no answers have been forthcoming.[10] The present thesis seeks an answer by looking not only at the strictly philosophical content of Plotinus' work, but also at the broader cultural context of the norms, style and culture of Platonism. It posits a set of tropes, collectively called 'philosophic silence', which governed the way in which the highest realms of Platonist enquiry were to be discussed, and in what ways they were to be 'concealed'.

The question this study attempts to answer is this: what is Plotinus doing when he tells us that he cannot, or will not, tell us something? The answer it gives has not only philosophical, but social, religious and literary ramifications, and, in the light of these, expands our understanding of the question of Plotinian ineffability itself, asking a question instead about literary and philosophic practice. This is not to abandon the logical side of the question of the ineffable in Late Platonism; rather, it is an attempt to enhance our understanding of the late antique project of writing the ineffable by understanding it *qua* writing: as the textual expression not only of the play of ideas and the search for truth through reason, but of the norms of deportment, ideas of philosophy as a way of life and a tradition

[8] On the logical considerations of Plotinian transcendence, see Aubenque 1971; Irwin 1989, 199; Mortley 1986 (108, 153); Sells 1994 (3–4); O'Meara 1998 (146–147); and further, p. 147 ff.

[9] See Blumenthal 1987 (550–553) for a review of scholarship until 1971 concentrating on the problem of the One in Plotinus.

[10] Pépin 1984 (32) asks this question, leaving it unanswered.

and notions of the lived encounter with higher truths so central to Late Platonist thinking.

'Cratylan' Silence

A quick survey of the Classical dilemmas of silence and discourse will help to orient the enquiry at the outset. When faced with an ineffable truth, the philosopher has a limited number of options. The first is simply to keep silent. This is the solution of Cratylus, who 'finally decided that speech was not needful, but just moved his finger',[11] immortalised in Plato's dialogue where the claims of language as a tool for the transmission of truth are subjected to scrutiny. Plato evidently rejected the Cratylan solution, and we know of no Platonist thinkers who followed the lead of Cratylus on this matter, abandoning verbal discourse. The Cratylan distrust of language, however, did not die with its eponymous proponent, and it was especially prominent in the sceptical Academy which the Platonists were concerned with refuting. The Platonists, by contrast, while agreeing that language is an inferior tool for the transmission of truth (and even appropriating sceptical arguments with a view to demonstrating this),[12] defuse the basic problem of language by positing direct modes of knowledge which bypass words and verbally conditioned thinking altogether, modes of knowing which are themselves in a sense 'silent'.

While the literal silence of Cratylus was rejected by the Platonists, the evocation of the refusal to speak became a powerful cultural gesture in the first centuries CE, appearing in the context of the mysteries philosophically reconceived or of the tropes of Pythagorean initiation and practice, and more generally as a mark of the Platonist sage, whose control of higher knowledge and maintenance of it as the province of an elite philosopher-class was a defining characteristic. Examples survive of 'silent philosopher' stories from late antiquity which shed an interesting light on this image of the 'serious philosopher' or *spoudaios*, a kind of gnomological biographic writing wherein the philosophic protagonist, be it Apollonius of Tyana or 'Secundus, the Silent Philosopher', enters into an actual state of verbal silence.[13] But it is a decidedly non-Cratylan silence which emerges from this literature, silence based in the signification (*semeiosis*) of a higher truth rather than the mere *aporia* inherent in the nature of language; a

[11] Arist. *Metaph.* 1010a12-13.
[12] See Wallis 1987; O'Meara 2000.
[13] See p. 78 in this volume.

positive, rather than a negative silence. Philostratus attributes a kind of discursive silence to the ancient Pythagoreans in his *Life of Apollonius*: they understood that καὶ τὸ σιωπᾶν λόγος, 'to keep silence is also to speak'.[14]

Aristotle, in the section of the *Metaphysics* cited above, goes on to mention Cratylus' critique of Heraclitus on the possibility of stepping in the same river twice (fr. 41 Bywater); Cratylus counters that to do so even once is an impossibility (ll. 13–15). While this critique may be conceived of as having been delivered in Cratylus' early, still vocal days, as presented by Aristotle it constitutes an early example of what becomes, in the later history of philosophy, a surprisingly common paradox: that of the silent philosopher who delivers *sententiae*.

Negative Discourse

A second philosophical option is to restrict discourse to the purely negative; able only to say what the transcendent truth is *not*, late antique philosophic and religious writers developed sophisticated negative vocabularies and techniques for outlining (insofar as they deemed it possible) the absence of what they wished to designate. This is the basic dynamic of 'apophatic' language.[15] Full apophasis goes a step further than simple negativity by incorporating paradox and self-negation into discourse in order to heighten the ability of writing to convey the radical indeterminacy of the non-subject of discourse, be it the Plotinian One, the nature of emptiness in Zen tracts, or the radical alterity of the *deus absconditus* in many of the theistic currents arising in the first centuries CE.

Plotinus tells us in Treatise 39, for instance, that the One is the origin of all noble and majestic things, and in another way not their origin (VI.8.8.8-9); that it is wholly unrelated to anything (13–14) and yet related to everything as the principle of all (9.6 *et passim*); that it cannot even be described with the verb 'to be', but that this and all other predications must be stripped away from it (8.15). It is at this second level of 'silence' that we begin to see the outlines of the contradiction created by the Platonist rejection of Cratylus alongside a strong concept of the ineffable: the One for Plotinus is completely unsayable[16] (and indeed even the

[14] Philostratus *V.A.* I.1[53].

[15] See especially Chapter 7.

[16] Language can only say what the One is not (V.3[49]14.6-7), and it itself remains unsayable (VI.9[9]4.11-12, quoting the Seventh Platonic Epistle 341c5) and unpredicable (III.7[45]2.6-7). See Chapter 6 in this volume.

'lower' hypostases of the Plotinian universe are 'very difficult to say' [17]), but the task of discourse requires that the philosopher continually make the attempt.[18] While this attempt is never successful in the task of expressing the ineffable, it is by no means seen as vain discourse; it is part of an active philosophic process which 'drives' the Plotinian seeker toward the ineffable One.[19]

Plotinus makes complex use of many different types of apophatic and negative language, and part of what follows will consist in a detailed analysis of how, exactly, he employs different types of negation as part of his philosophic pedagogy. Sometimes Plotinus simply recognises that analogical or equivocal use of normal language is inadequate but not false in discussing the One, and that, since it cannot be named, 'One' is a satisfactory and normal way of speaking of it (e.g. VI.9[9]5.31-2 and ff.). More characteristically, however, he tends to emphasise precisely the tensions inherent in such an unsatisfactory arrangement; the 'One' and 'Good' are both false appellations.[20]

It will be argued that one of the key differences between Plotinus and his Middle Platonist and Neopythagorean predecessors is that Plotinus seems, based on the extant evidence, to have taken most seriously the task of unsaying the ineffable; he is committed to the internal logic of transcendence and his writing grapples with it in a uniquely sustained way. At the same time, apophasis – simple negation or the negation of negation – does not account fully for what Plotinus is doing in his discourse of the One, as he himself recognises, Plotinus maintains in several places in the *Enneads* that apophatic negations themselves remain at the level of *logismos* or *dianoia*, the level of human thought from which all true knowledge of the One is excluded by its nature.[21] Apophasis can point out the need for the aspiring philosopher to transcend discursive thought and outline the edges of the discursive thought-world, but it cannot itself cross over into that which lies beyond.[22]

[17] VI.9[9]3.1-3.
[18] *Ibid.* 4.11-16.
[19] The One is unsayable and unwriteable but when we speak and write we 'impel toward it' (VI.9[9]4.11-16: λέγομεν καὶ γράφομεν πέμποντες εἰς αὐτό).
[20] II.9[33]1.1-8; V.5[32]6.26-30; VI.7[38]38.4-9; VI.9[9]5.29-34. Cf. Bussanich 1996 (41).
[21] See VI.9[9]9.51; VI.7[38]34.3; VI.9[9]7.15 and 20; cf. Hadot 1986b, 247. The details of Plotinian anthropology and the theory of knowledge according to which these concepts play themselves out are discussed on p. 197 ff.
[22] See VI.9[9]9.51; VI.7[38]34.3; VI.9[9]7.15 and 20.

Plotinian Poetics of Transcendence

This book argues that Plotinus is doing something more complex with his philosophic writing than either simple silence or simple negativity will allow. It argues that there is a third philosophic option which incorporates but goes beyond both the silence of Cratylus and the negative discourse of the theologians. Strong claims will be made for Plotinian poetics as an intrinsic and powerful element in Plotinian philosophy, and the discussion will attempt to elucidate the way in which Plotinus' use of written silence is in fact intended as a practical, performative philosophic method in his pedagogic writing.

What is meant by 'poetics' here is an approach to literary creation which emphasises the performative power of text; in this case, the ability of written philosophy to change its reader. One of the assumptions of the present study is that philosophical content cannot be stripped of its literary context, and one of its aims is to show how the literary character of Plotinus' philosophy is an integral part of the account which Plotinus gives and is essential to understanding that account fully. 'Poetics' is thus to be understood as referring not to the narrow genre of writing poetry, but to any theory and practice of writing *qua* writing which takes into account the status of writing itself: its epistemological possibilities including truth-claims, its ability or otherwise to evoke things-in-themselves, and of course, taken in a Late Platonist context, its *ontological* claims. On the philosophic level, then, a primary aim of this work is an analysis of Plotinian writing in context.

More specifically, a certain speech-act is being investigated, namely the positing of a truth and the simultaneous denial that it may, or can, be spoken of. This simple dialectical device, the revealing of a hiding or the hiding of a revealing, lies at the heart of a complex philosophic *topos*, elements of which developed in the first centuries CE both among Platonist and Neopythagorean philosophers and among more demotic Platonising religious movements, referred to in what follows as Platonist 'philosophic silence'.

The growth of this *topos* will be traced in the development of three interrelated trends: on the conceptual level, in the rise of the transcendent absolute and of a conception of certain aspects of reality which are truly ineffable; on the social level, in the changing face of Platonist elitism transformed by the new challenges of late antique ideological struggles for control of the truth; and on the literary or rhetorical level, in the Platonists'

new methods of reading Plato and of constructing a broader wisdom tradition within the cultures of the past wherein the absolute truth is contained and transmitted by a specially sanctioned, or even divinely ordained, chain of transmission, to be accessed only by the philosophic elite. Having established a historical model for these developments within philosophy, this book will investigate Plotinus' place within these traditions of written silence. It will outline his poetics of unsaying in a way that is both historically contextualised and which allows us access, as readers of the *Enneads*, to a greater understanding of what Plotinus was doing when he employed techniques of secrecy and silence in his pursuit of literary access to true knowledge about reality.

Modes of Reading and Writing Philosophical Silence

To begin by illustrating some of the dynamics of these literary techniques, we may pose a preliminary question to an example of Enneadic text, a quotation from the early Plotinian Treatise 9, *On the Good or the One*.[23] This treatise is a sustained discussion of the highest level of hyper-ontology in Plotinus' world-view, the One or Good, and of the soul's means of access to this hypostasis, and shows the degree to which Plotinus' discourse is already immersed in the methods of philosophic silence from quite early on in his career as a writer. A single sentence will serve as a condensed example of some of the themes and methodologies which Plotinus uses in unsaying the truth and revealing its hiding. This passage comes near the end of the treatise; having discussed from several perspectives the ways in which the One is unnameable, indescribable by normal predicates[24] and unapproachable by normal cognitive means,[25] Plotinus tells his reader:

> This is the intention of the command given in the mysteries here below not to disclose to the uninitiated; since the Good is not disclosable, it prohibits the declaration of the divine to another who has not also himself had the good fortune to see.[26]

[23] The *Enneads* have titles which come down from antiquity, chosen by Porphyry, Plotinus' student and editor (Porph. *Plot.* 4). On Porphyry's edition of Plotinus' works, see H + S 1, Vol. 1 ix-x.

[24] VI.9[9]5.31 ff; 6.55-7.

[25] This treatise is a rich source for Plotinus' circumscription of normal knowledge through creative metaphor; the One can be seen by *nous* (VI.9[9]3.22-27), and as it were touched (οἷον ἐφάψασθαι καὶ θιγεῖν [4.27; cf. 7.3-5]), yet cannot be given even the predicates 'ἐκείνου' or 'ὄντος', discourse instead 'running around' it in attempts to explain what it has undergone in its proximity (49–55). Neither can it be experienced by way either of normal knowledge (*epistêmê*) nor even of *noêsis*, but only by a presence superior to knowledge (κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα [4.1-4]).

[26] VI.9[9]11.1 ff: Τοῦτο δὴ ἐθέλον δηλοῦν τὸ τῶν μυστηρίων τῶνδε ἐπίταγμα, τὸ μὴ ἐκφέρειν εἰς μὴ μεμυημένους, ὡς οὐκ ἔκφορον ἐκεῖνο ὄν, ἀπεῖπε δηλοῦν πρὸς ἄλλον τὸ θεῖον, ὅτῳ μὴ καὶ αὐτῷ ἰδεῖν εὐτύχηται. Armstrong's translation (2003).

Reading the Truth Hidden in Tradition

As has been noted, Plotinus' philosophical discussions of the One and of the soul's relation to the One are usually approached through philosophical analysis, and it is worthwhile by way of contrast to begin by looking at the way Plotinus is using culture in this text. Plotinus reads the ancient injunction to silence associated with 'the mysteries here below', an injunction to secrecy in the interests of cultic exclusivity, as concealing a philosophical doctrine of ineffability. We may note, firstly, that Plotinus is applying a method of philosophic reading to a cultural institution which is itself extra-textual; such appropriation of religion in the service of philosophy is an important dynamic in Platonist thought explored.[27] We note further that this 'reading' of the mysteries is itself hidden from the 'uninitiated' – that is, from anyone untrained in the particular hermeneutic of Platonist exegesis which discovers (or constructs) the hidden meaning. A second hermeneutic level of secrecy is thus layered below the first, manifest one, attributing to the true philosophy which is able to discover such hidden meanings the status of initiation and the privileged knowledge of the *mystês*.[28]

This reading of tradition is part of a larger programme which Plotinus embraces, and in some respects pushes forward, of re-reading not only Plato, 'Pythagoras' and Aristotle through late antique eyes, but also Hellenic religion, Homer and other texts and traditions of the Hellenic past, constructing from these materials a perennial tradition with claims to absolute authority and privileged access to the truth. Plotinus' well-known claim to be merely an expounder of ancient wisdom rather than an original thinker amounts to the location of a type of absolute philosophical authority in a non-existent, or *silent*, textual tradition, but one which is paradoxically subjected to the hermeneutic rigours of Late Platonist exegesis.[29] This process in Plotinus embraces re-reading of the ancient mysteries as ageless philosophical wisdom, as seen above, as well as allegorical interpretation of traditional myths, and of Homer and other poets, as repositories of inspired but hidden truths of theology, and, most interestingly, the reading of Plato and other philosophers as though they too were writing with a hidden subtext in precisely the same way. The following discussion will bring out a technical hermeneutic vocabulary for

[27] Chapter 3, esp. p. 103 ff.

[28] The equation of philosophy with the mysteries, and of philosophical *paideia* with initiation, is widespread among Platonists; some reassessment of its significance to philosophy is outlined on p. 106 ff.

[29] What I call Plotinus' 'perennialism' is discussed p. 126 ff.

reading the unwritten tradition both within and outside the canonical texts of Platonist philosophy. It will also problematise to some degree the easy identification of Plotinus as a 'Neoplatonist', or even a self-styled 'Platonist', arguing that Plotinus defined himself simply as a 'right philosopher', an interpreter of a chain of perennial wisdom of which Plato constituted a single link.[30]

Hiding the Secret, Revealing the Hiding

It is characteristic of the discourse of secrecy and revealing employed in this kind of exegesis of the ancient mysteries that, considered logically, it contains an inherent self-contradiction: Plotinus here betrays the 'intention of the command given in the mysteries' even as he reveals its true meaning. In declaring the true nature of the injunction to silence of the mysteries, Plotinus ought surely to be profaning them.

Moreover, Plotinus is revealing the mysteries in a *written* text, a Platonic *bête noire* when the *arcana* of philosophy are under discussion; the traditional Platonic privileging of orality over the written word in philosophical teaching constitutes a paradoxical dynamic underlying all Plotinian writing which seeks to uncover the absolute truths of philosophy.[31]

The theme of 'the secret revealed' takes many forms in Platonist writing, and will appear again and again in the discussion that follows. At the same time, the 'revelation' is often simultaneously a hiding: Plotinus can reveal the true meaning of the injunction, but he is ultimately prevented from disobeying the injunction by the essential incommunicability of the nature of the Good.

The Self-Hiding Secret

In this sense, the secret of the mystery is a self-hiding secret, and Plotinus can only point to the fact of this hiding, not to the hidden itself.[32] He is discussing 'the mysteries self-defended, the mysteries that *can* not be revealed. Fools can only profane them. The dull can neither penetrate the secretum or divulge it to others.'[33] The parallel here between the inaccessibility of the Good, its self-hiding nature which is only accessible to the serious philosopher if at all and the inaccessible nature of the true meaning of the

[30] See p. 253 ff.
[31] As discussed p. 69 ff.
[32] Cf. Pépin 1984, 32.
[33] Pound 1968, 145.

mystery injunction, also to be unearthed only by the adept, is striking. I discuss ways in which the 'self-hiding' secret of the transcendent added a new dimension to philosophic silence not to be found before the second century CE, and which we see seriously explored for the first time in Plotinus' works. The juxtaposition of the rhetoric of hiding and the revelation of the secret is also of note; we will find again and again in our history of Platonist philosophic silence the revelation of a secret not indeed hidden but actually flagged by the rhetorics of secrecy and silence.

Secrecy as Silence, Silence as Secrecy

Further consideration of the passage reveals an exegetical sleight of hand: the traditional law of non-disclosure of the mysteries is smoothly transferred to an indication of the philosophical truth of a Plotinian claim, *viz.* the ineffability of the Good. In other words, the *prohibition* of disclosure becomes the *impossibility* of disclosure, secrecy becoming silence; again, Plotinus is telling a secret while simultaneously withdrawing it.

We find in this passage an interplay of two modes of what might be called written silence: writing the prohibition of disclosure and writing the impossibility of disclosure. This interplay, which Plotinus and later Platonists employ extensively, is fostered by ambiguities in the Greek vocabulary of silence itself: the mysteries were traditionally ἀπόρρητα or ἄρρητα, 'unsayable', i.e., 'not to be spoken of', words which in the course of time and with the rise of the idea of the ineffable in post-Hellenistic philosophy and religion, came more and more to signify 'unsayable' in an absolute sense – that is, 'impossible to reveal'.[34] As I argue, however, these terms never lost their original signification, and always suggested secrecy as well as ineffability. A key aspect of philosophic silence is thus the interplay, or interference, between the concepts of secrecy and silence.

The Indeterminacy of Ineffability and Philosophic Register

As will be discussed, there are many loci in Plotinus and his Middle Platonist predecessors where neither meaning can be exclusively accurate; the term 'unsayable' hovers between the two meanings, and signifies neither in

[34] Cf. Casel 1919, 6; Pépin 1984, 32–35; Brisson 1987, 96–97. Mortley 1986, 8–10 notes an inherent potential for ambiguity in the use of the Greek alpha privative, whereby an adjective so modified may have either an emphatic or a totalising meaning, an ambiguity which would be exploited by the apophatic discourse of later Platonists (citing Arist. *Metaph.* 1023a1: ἄτμητον may mean 'difficult to cut' or 'impossible to cut'). We may add to this the deontic meanings associated with the terms ἀπόρρητον and ἄρρητον.

a full or absolute sense. Apophatic language is characterised by a tension between predication and its impossibility brought about, in its simplest form, through an immediate and systematic gainsaying of any predicative statement. The rhetorical alternation and interference between the two modes of 'cannot speak' and 'must not speak' result in further, deeper layers of indeterminacy in Plotinian language.[35] Plotinus incorporates an indeterminacy of 'register' into his treatment of the ineffable, blending the concerns of philosophy with those of religion while refusing ever to set foot firmly on either side of the fence.[36] Similarly, he sometimes switches register from the dispassionate discussion of concepts to the first-person language of the personal encounter with higher metaphysical entities, often with a disconcerting abruptness which leaves the boundaries between the two modes of discourse blurred, and the nature of the ineffable reality under discussion further removed from any concrete concept which the reader might form.[37]

Attempts at translation serve to illustrate how difficult it is to maintain this suspension of register in interpretation. Simply by capitalising 'the Good', we risk evoking a theistic mindset foreign to, or at least irreducibly uncertain in, the original text[38] (while the alternative, leaving terms such as 'one' or 'good' uncapitalised, puts unjustified strain on readers). Plotinus tells us that 'the good is not disclosable', but 'the Good' is already disclosing something of the translator's interpretative approach, and adding an element of determinacy which the author strives to avoid. It should be understood that the capitalisation of 'One' and 'Good' in the present work are for ease of reading, and the reader should strive to attribute no personal or theistic characteristics to Plotinus' first principle.

The Paradox of Writing the Ineffable

A final seeming contradiction may be extracted from our passage, one which returns our reading to the initial question which sparked this

[35] The term ἀπόφασις, in 'a coincidence worthy of note' (Mortley 1986, 429) is itself ambiguous, having in fact two radically opposed meanings; it may be derived from ἀποφήμι to mean, on the simplest level, 'negation, denial', and from ἀποφαίνομαι to mean 'statement, affirmation'.

[36] The categories of 'religion' and 'philosophy' are modern, and it would be more correct to say that, for Plotinus, concerns which to modern philosophers are bracketed as 'religious' or 'theological' are central to philosophy proper; it is however clear that these concerns were not considered strictly philosophical by all philosophers in Plotinus' day, and that his project was concerned with an appropriation of the sacred by the philosophical; cf. van Nuffelen 2011, 7–10, and see p. 103 ff.

[37] See Chapter 7.

[38] See e.g. the translation of Armstrong (2003) *passim*. Cf. Sells 1994, 11 and the comments of Hadot cited p. 33 below.

inquiry: the status of the *Enneads* themselves as written works. The impossibility of disclosure of the Good through language to anyone who has not already seen it himself[39] is a challenge to the very enterprise of philosophic writing. It would seem that writing about the One or Good cannot, according to Plotinus, serve as an exposition of its nature,[40] nor can it be of use to such as 'have seen', whose knowledge will be, by definition, perfect and self-confirming.[41] It is left to the reader to determine why Plotinus undertakes such a project at all. This problem has largely been ignored in interpretation; after all, Plotinus clearly felt it worthwhile to write his treatises, and who are we to take him to task for this? Nevertheless, the question remains a cogent and significant one, and one which we sometimes see Plotinus pondering in the *Enneads* themselves.

Outline of the Present Work

The foregoing discussion has highlighted some of the ways in which philosophical culture, rather than philosophy *simpliciter*, influenced the ways in which Plotinus wrote about the ineffable. Plotinus was not writing in a cultural vacuum: there was a tradition of *silentium philosophorum*[42] in which he both participated and took a defining role, and which determined part of what it was to philosophise rightly in his day and time. Part I of this book will establish the theoretical parameters of philosophic silence and draw up a historical model of its development up to Plotinus' time. The book as a whole will contextualise the *Enneads* in terms of this tradition. Chapter 1 begins by outlining the interpretative difficulties which the recondite nature of the subject presents.

[39] The One or Good may not be said or thought, but it may (sometimes) be *seen* and *touched*, a shift in vocabulary which plays an important part in the poetic articulation of silence in the Plotinian corpus, and in fact emerges as one of the ways in which Plotinus creates a change in the philosophic register mentioned above. See Chapter 7.

[40] Although, as has been discussed, certain *negative* statements about the One can be expounded in a fairly normal, discursive way, the truth-value of even these statements is called into question by Plotinus' apophatic refusal to predicate the One.

[41] Technically speaking, there can never be knowledge of the One. The identification with or participation in *nous*, however, which is the highest form of what we might call 'knowledge' and which comes closest to realisation of the One through contemplation, is by definition perfect, timeless and complete, and its highest 'part' is capable of self-transcendence and an ineffable attainment of the One (as discussed in Chapter 6).

[42] The term is from Casel 1919, the first large-scale study of philosophic silence, which remains the only full attempt at a historical survey of the kinds of written silence dealt with in this book (partial exceptions include Mortley 1986 and Montiglio 2000, both of which provide a more theoretically nuanced approach than Casel, but which are more narrow in their scope).

The following three chapters conduct a basic historical investigation of the rise of elements of philosophic silence. Chapter Two examines the surviving pre-Classical and Classical sources which were later developed by Platonists into a tradition of esoteric philosophy, and examines the figure of the 'silent philosopher' as he appears in late antique accounts. Chapter 3 examines the development in the first centuries CE of the ideas of tradition and of esoteric transmission which informed the writings of such thinkers as Alcinoüs, Numenius, Celsus, Maximus of Tyre and Plutarch. It charts the development of concepts of a *philosophia perennis* among Platonists, a simultaneously culturally embedded and transcendent truth which serves, in later Platonism, as the historical *location* of the hidden, ineffable truth of philosophy, and the concurrent development of a Platonist hermeneutic which read Plato as the propounder of a hidden, dogmatic message. Chapter 4 turns to Plotinus, showing the development of these same 'traditional' materials in the *Enneads*. Not surprisingly, it emerges that Plotinus, like all philosophers, was writing within a tradition and, like all great philosophers, bending the tradition's contours and lexicon toward a set of needs which were his own.

In Part II the discussion turns to the theoretical side of the philosophy of transcendence. Chapter 5 examines the rise of the transcendent absolute in Middle Platonism, concentrating on theories of the limits of discourse and of esoteric and other indirect modes of expression as envisioned by these philosophers. This chapter considers Middle Platonism as a broad cultural movement incorporating the Platonising religious movements of the first centuries CE as well as philosophy proper (and several gradations between these two, somewhat artificial, extremes), and examines the concurrent rise of strong tropes of transcendence, silence and ineffability in these movements. Chapter 6 again turns to Plotinus, analysing his stance on the problems of transcendence, which he treats with a striking depth and rigour that draws on both his philosophical and religious predecessors. This chapter will use the preceding discussions to cast light on the metaphysical situation of Plotinian discourse, particularly the status of *nous* and *noêsis* as regards truth-claims, and the anthropology which situates the human agent within the Plotinian world. Taken together, Chapters 5 and 6 describe the conceptual space within which Plotinus is writing and address the problems of the nature of writing, both for the writer and for the reader as philosophical agents, the ability of discursive thought to attain to and transmit true knowledge and the theoretical potential for philosophic writing to surpass the limits of the discursive.

Chapter 7 is a detailed analysis of Plotinus' strategies of writing with regard to the limits of discourse, conducting a close reading of an exemplary passage and setting it in dialogue with other passages from the *Enneads*. It begins with investigations of Plotinian techniques of aphairesis and apophasis, and shows, through case studies from the *Enneads*, the ways in which these techniques, with their function of 'stripping away' false ideas (indeed, *all* ideas) about reality and of unsaying the partially true statements of ontology (that is, *all* statements), are used as tools of written philosophy. After the first section delineating the self-imposed limits of discourse in Plotinus, the second investigates the ways in which Plotinus transcends (or transgresses against) these limits in his writing. A third section makes some proposals as to how Plotinus is using the unsaid and unsayable in his work as a whole in the service of his philosophy of transcendence, while also considering the social aspects of his philosophic silence.

Finally, the Conclusion draws together the cultural and social themes of Part I with the theoretical discussions of Part II, delineating a model of philosophic silence in Plotinus which incorporates both aspects of philosophy in a single discursive *topos*. Several appendices expand on points of interest which lie outside the main arguments of this book. Footnotes throughout direct the reader to these essays, which are designed to be helpful and enriching, rather than essential, to the main text.

PART I

The Cultural Roots of Platonist Philosophic Silence

CHAPTER I

De philosophorum Græcorum silentio mystico: Preliminaries

> Ὁ ἄναξ οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς, οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει.
>
> Heraclit. fr. 93 DK.

Written Silence, the Esoteric and Esoteric Hermeneutics

All discussions of apophatic language are inherently difficult, and all readings of texts that invoke esotericism are inherently problematic. In approaching texts like the *Enneads*, which speak apophatically *and* frame the discussion in terms of esotericism, we must tread with particular care. The present chapter will seek to explore the problems which arise from this sort of text, and to offer some solutions; to this end, a range of specialised 'terms of art' used throughout the present work will first be outlined. This book discusses a diverse set of discursive phenomena under the rubric of 'philosophic silence', including 'esotericism', 'the esoteric' and 'esoteric hermeneutics', each of which is to be understood in a very specific sense.

'Philosophic Silence'

'Philosophic silence' was an aspect of antique philosophic culture, and of Platonist philosophic culture in particular, which governed the way in which the absolute truths of philosophy were to be discussed. It is the name I give to the spoken or written evocation of tropes of secrecy and silence through which a tradition of written hiding and revealing was enacted. This book will discuss many aspects of philosophic silence, constructing a historical model of some complexity, but analysis reveals a fairly simple speech act at its heart.

This basic marker of philosophic silence may be defined as 'a speech act which combines rhetorics of hiding and revealing when dealing with

the philosophic truth event'.[1] 'Truth event' is meant the (often notional or postponed) revelation to the reader of the truth under discussion. Philosophic silence thus incorporates both the saying of silence (for example, where an author indicates that he cannot say the subject of discourse because it is ineffable) and the saying of secrecy (for example, where the author indicates that he has more that he might say, but that he cannot or will not for reasons of philosophic privileging of knowledge) and often conflates the two. We have seen, in the Plotinian quotation cited on page 8, the invocation of sacred mysteries, the invocation of secret meanings hidden within them and the statement of ineffability, all of which partake of the rhetorics of secrecy and silence in distinct ways. Philosophic silence may also incorporate the 'revelation' of a 'secret' (such as the exegesis of a passage read esoterically), an act which also employs the rhetorics of hiding and revealing, in this case in a reversed dynamic.

It may seem tendentious to refer to a spoken and written practice as 'silence', but the term is chosen with the aim of emphasising the unspoken, unwritten elements of such texts. When Plotinus tells us that the One is not the One, he is pointing to a reality which his text cannot encompass; he is, in fact, remaining silent on the subject of what the One *is*. When he tells us that the One can be called the One for the purposes of discourse, but that it is not truly 'the One', he is alluding to a reality which his words do not comprehend. He is, in effect, emphasising his own silence on the matter. This emphasis is what differentiates philosophic silence from simple silence. Through philosophic silence, authors reveal a concealment, and through that revelation conceal that which they purport to reveal.

While this definition of philosophic silence is a discursive one, based in a kind of speech-act, we are chiefly concerned with its cultural manifestations which take complex forms. Post-Hellenistic philosophers operated under fairly established standards of deportment, and their works were subject to many expectations regarding what they might say and might not say. This complex of unwritten rules and expectations determined the social side of philosophic silence. Platonists did not simply make speech-acts of

[1] The 'speech act' is defined by Searle 1969. Philosophic silence as I define it here has much in common with the idea of 'the esoteric' theorised in the work of von Stuckrad as an element of discourse within religions which makes claims to 'real' or absolute knowledge and the means of making this knowledge available … but which discusses this knowledge using 'the rhetoric of a hidden truth' (von Stuckrad 2000, 9–10). The present work avoids using the term 'the esoteric' in this sense mainly because the more everyday meaning of this term is essential for the discussion which follows, and there is no convenient word with which to replace it in that context. The reader is nonetheless referred to the work of von Stuckrad and other scholars of the esoteric (especially Lamberton 1995; Urban 1998, 235 ff.) for insights into what the present work terms 'philosophic silence'.

hiding and revealing: they referred to esoteric traditions, valued a model of philosophic *gravitas* characterised in part by a certain taciturnity, theorised and enforced notions of philosophic elitism, discussed ineffable realities and engaged in numerous other concrete actions of philosophic silence. Taken together, these philosophic acts comprise the tropes of philosophic silence.

It is not that Platonists were expected genuinely to keep secrets; on the contrary, it is rare indeed to find a Platonist invocation of the rhetorics of secrecy and concealment which does not involve the revelation of the purported secret. Rather, Platonists followed a normative practice of philosophic silence. The exercise of rhetorics of secrecy and silence were part and parcel of their literary style, and could also influence their behaviour. They were expected to exercise philosophic reserve and to maintain elitist standards in the distribution of knowledge; philosophic silence was a way in which they signified that they were doing so. These practices of rhetorical hiding and revealing thus have significance for our understanding of the constructions of social power in antique society, especially in the late antique period, when opposed factions arose with competing claims to 'secret wisdom'.

Secrecy and 'Secret Knowledge'

Secrecy in this book should be understood in the broad sociological sense outlined by Georg Simmel: it is not merely the concealment of a given item of information (although it may take that form), but rather the exercise of social exclusion through privileging of knowledge.[2] This book views secrecy as an act, which may bring with it what Pierre Bourdieu has called 'cultural capital', concrete social power arising from a perceived, non-concrete power wielded by the possessor of the 'secret'.[3] As Guy Stroumsa has observed, 'There is no better way to publicize a text than to prohibit its publication, strongly limit its readership, or insist that it reveals deep and heavily guarded secrets.'[4] Less obvious advantages can accrue as well; the Conclusion will discuss philosophic silence in relation to the acquisition of patronage and influence in late antique society.

[2] Simmel 1950, 330–344 is the classic sociological account of secrecy, understood as the act of public concealment; 332–333 discusses the 'fascination of secrecy', whereby these acts gain their power.

[3] Bourdieu 2010 outlines the theory of cultural capital. The present work will return to this concept in the Conclusion, where philosophic silence is discussed in relation to the institutions and power-relations of late antique Græco–Roman Platonist philosophy.

[4] Stroumsa 1996a, 155.

We see public secrecy in texts on the fringes of Platonism, such as the 'Sacred Discourses' (*Hieroi Logoi*), pseudo-Pythagorean texts whose very name indicates that they contain 'mysteries', or the opening of the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John*, which announces that the text is a mystery and a secret. Indeed, every apocryphon, by virtue of its title, is presented as 'secret knowledge'.[5] The present work will use this term to refer to any text which announces that it is a secret. It follows that one may thus exercise secrecy without possessing an actual secret. A book or author may present 'secret knowledge' by means of advertising it as such, in which case the 'secret' character of the knowledge is created by the act of revealing it; 'secret knowledge' is in fact a type of open text which emphasises its importance, and creates a sense of elite solidarity between author and reader, by labelling itself as esoteric.[6]

Secrecy as it is conceived here also has a perhaps unexpected application: statements of an ineffable reality are in fact acts of secrecy. Scholarship on Platonism tends to approach such statements solely from the doctrinal or logical standpoint; this book will also approach them as acts of secrecy with the performative understanding that this entails, especially regarding Plotinus' accounts of the ineffable contact with the One beyond being.

The 'Esoteric' and 'Esotericism'

The term 'esoteric' is to be understood in the following discussion in its most basic sense: 'meant only for the initiated'.[7] It might thus refer to a written work (such as the esoteric corpus of Aristotle) which is kept from general circulation (although the Aristotelean esoteric corpus was in fact freely circulated, at least after a certain time, a point to which we shall return). Alternately, it may refer to a doctrine or doctrines whose form – be it a riddle, an allegory, or another oblique and obscure form of discourse, such as any number of Pythagorean 'secret' doctrines expressed as 'symbols' – is understood as hiding it in plain sight.[8]

This latter meaning refers to the more common phenomenon in the history of Platonism: the number of texts which we know of from antiquity which were genuinely esoteric in the sense of the Aristotelean corpus is minute, while examples of statements read as expressing a hidden meaning

[5] Tardieu 1984, 239 suggests 'book of secrets' as a translation.
[6] Chapters 3 and 4 give examples of this from the history of Platonism.
[7] The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford 1990), *s.v.*
[8] The Pythagorean 'symbol' is discussed p. 118.

are legion. 'Esotericism', for the purposes of this book, is thus not taken simply to mean the exercise of secrecy with regard to that which is esoteric; I use it to refer to the more specialised practice of hiding the esoteric materials 'in plain sight'. The classical example of this sort of esotericism is that with which Plato and Pythagoras became synonymous; they were thought to have sought to hide certain of their doctrines from the masses at large, which led them not to conceal them utterly, but rather to publish them in such a way that only an elect few could understand the true message.[9] Esotericism is thus a subset of secrecy, with the difference that the esoteric applies specifically to items of doctrine or other conceptual materials. Secrecy, by contrast, might be exercised with regard to a ritual or a sacred object, for instance, which is to be kept from general view.

Aristotle would not be a practitioner of esotericism by this definition, unless we consider that the eventual release of his esoteric works to the general public was part of a strategy of hiding on his part (as Plutarch believed).[10] Plato, as read by the 'Tübingenschule', on the other hand, would be an esoteric author; the modern debate over Plato's esotericism I refer to as the 'Esotericist Debate', and 'Esoteric', capitalised thus, will always refer specifically to this modern controversy.[11] My working definition of esotericism also fits the writing methodology outlined by the modern theorist of public secrecy Leo Strauss, which, however, he calls 'exoteric writing' to emphasise its public character, its quality of 'hiding in plain sight'.[12]

The terms 'esoteric' and 'esotericism' thus imply a statement of intent on the part of an author: in using these terms as I understand them, one attributes to a given thinker or thinkers a desire to hide certain doctrines. This book, however, *will not claim that any author was an esotericist*. What it will do is study the ways in which the Middle Platonists and Plotinus read their philosophic predecessors *as though they had been esotericists*.

'Esoteric Hermeneutics'

The process of reading or interpreting an author as an esotericist, and the author's text as esoteric, I call 'esoteric hermeneutics' or 'esoteric reading'. By means of this type of reading, a work may be interrogated for levels of meaning or doctrines which are not strictly present in the text, under the

[9] The origins and development of the esoteric Plato and the esoteric Pythagoras are discussed in the following chapter.
[10] See p. 77.
[11] On the *Tübingenschule* and this debate, see Appendix D, p. 266 ff.
[12] Strauss' theory is summarised Appendix D, p. 270.

assumption that they were intentionally hidden as a subtext by the author. It is reading 'for esotericism'. We, as readers, only discover the esoteric reading of an author – for example Plotinus' reading of Plato's dialogues as texts encoding hidden meanings – through the author's writing about that reading. Plotinus' hermeneutic of Plato's dialogues as sources of an absolute truth hidden in enigmas appears to us not in Plato's text, but in Plotinus'.

One of the key characteristics of a truly esoteric subtext is that it cannot be proven to exist in the text. The use of a cypher or other demonstrable interpretative key on an author's part, or a programmatic statement by the author to the effect that his work was expressed esoterically, would of course minimise this difficulty, but we never seem to find such signposts in the authors read by the Platonists as esoteric authors.[13] Instead, vague hints, irony, myths and contradictions are read as signposts pointing to an esoteric subtext, and by this means entire cultural corpora can be subsumed into a single esoteric tradition, as Chapters 3 and 4 discuss in detail in the case of Platonism.

Philosophic Silence and the Esoteric

Philosophic silence is an overarching trope, and the various permutations of the esoteric are related, but more focused, concepts. Esoteric reading becomes part of philosophic silence when it is written in exegetical form. For example, Plutarch is exercising philosophic silence when he finds Platonist doctrines hidden within the myths and rituals of ancient sages and explains his exegesis of them in *On Isis and Osiris*. Since we cannot know if these sages meant to hide such doctrines in their myths – in other words, if they really were esotericists – the only access we have to their esotericism is through Plutarch's writing of his esoteric reading. A given instance of esotericism, as I define it, may or may not have had a genuine historical occurrence (Plato may well have meant to hide secret doctrines within his dialogues) but this fact is generally not susceptible to proof. What is available to our scrutiny is the written act of interpretation which reads an author as esoteric. In other words, for all practical purposes esotericism is created by esoteric hermeneutics. This creation is one aspect of philosophic silence.

[13] We do seem to find such programmatic statements in Patristic writers – for example, the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria (see Appendix D, p. 271); such demonstrable esotericism does exist historically, but I have been unable to find it in the Platonist tradition, except for the problematic case of the Second Platonic Epistle, discussed p. 68.

Apophatic Discourse

I use the terms 'apophasis' and 'apophatic language' not to indicate solely the rather narrow genre of apophatic writing which arose in late antiquity, the *via negativa* of the Christian theologians and the systematic, serial negations found in Platonist authors like Proclus.[14] Rather, it is used here in an extended sense, as 'any spoken or written act which attempts to deny predicability through mutually negating statements'.

We may begin by defining the basic apophatic 'unit' as a statement *a*, whether positive or negative, which is contradicted by a following statement *b*, with the result that neither *a* nor *b* is true, although both may be not strictly false. In discourse about a supreme principle, god, or other (non)entity conceived of in terms of its differing from *a* and *b* by *surpassing* both *a* and *b*, the negation will have an elative force; that which is neither *a* nor *b* must be higher than, beyond, or otherwise superior to both *a* and *b*.[15]

I do not wish to limit the term apophasis to the well-known elative *via negativa* or 'negative theology', as there are points at which Plotinus employs apophatic language in quite the opposite sense, to describe matter, the lowest form of non-reality in his world-view.[16] Hence, apophasis as understood in this book may be elative or it may not be, but as long as it employs the techniques of recursion and postponement of truth, it is apophasis. It may further be noted that apophasis need not be confined to this classic, tightly structured format: Chapter 7 argues for a broad-scale apophatic reading of the *Enneads* as a whole.

On the Difficulties of Reading Silence

There are serious interpretational difficulties in reading a text which claims to contain truths that are self-hiding, unreadable, ungraspable, or ineffable

[14] See Proclus' systematic discussion at *In Parm*. VI 1072.14-1077.15. On this genre see Bréhier 1938; Rist 1964a; Whittaker 1969a; Whittaker 1971; Armstrong 1973; Mortley 1975; Trouillard 1976, 307–315; Katz 1978; Mortley 1982; Mortley 1986, 125–142; Derrida 1987; Sells 1994; Carabine 1995, 2–10; Lamberton 1995; Turner 2007, 70–72.

[15] Cf. Turner 2007, 70 n. 36: 'The *via negativa* is implemented by negative predications followed by an adversative elative clause: either triple negation, "it is neither X nor Y nor Z, but it is something superior" or double, antithetical negation, "it is neither X nor non-X, but it is something superior" or just a single negation, "it is not X but it is superior to X." The "but" clause is always positive and elative, referring to "something else" above, beyond, superior to the previously negated predications. Thus negation of all alternatives on one level of thought launches the mind upward to a new, more eminent level of insight.'

[16] Plotinus may be said to employ apophatic language when describing matter, which occupies the lowest rung in his hierarchy of being (e.g. II.4[12], *On Matter*); this is apophasis, but definitely not 'negative theology'. Trouillard sees 'negative theology' as an integral, defining feature of Neoplatonism (Trouillard 1976, 307), but his excellent insights on the uses of apophatic language suffer somewhat from his use of this imprecise term.

to the 'uninitiated'. It will be convenient to begin to explore these by revisiting the Classical *topos* of mystery initiation used by Plotinus in the quotation cited on page 8.

The mysteries offer salvific knowledge to the seeker; on the other hand, the non-initiate is rigorously excluded.[17] Both parts of this dichotomy are essential to the mysteries as an institution. It is noteworthy that the *idea* of the inviolate nature of the mysteries was to survive well into the late antique period, despite the well-known historical facts that, for example, Alcibiades and his companions had been accused in Classical Athens of revealing the mysteries,[18] the widespread story that Aeschylus had 'accidentally' revealed the mysteries in a play,[19] or the antique literary sources which 'reveal' the content of the Eleusinian ceremony.[20] The first important point to emphasise here is that a rhetoric of silence need not imply a genuine secret, or at least not the secret which it ostensibly hides,[21] and that silence, viewed from a social perspective, can serve not primarily as a form of exclusion but as a positive mark of belonging. The initiand's silence indicates his special status,[22] and the secrecy of the mysteries in antiquity seems in fact to have served as a form of publicity.[23] The situation of the proverbially inviolate, yet in reality well-reported, mystery secrets is reminiscent of the Platonic lecture 'On the Good', which was widely reported in antiquity, but nevertheless remained a rhetorical locus of secrecy for Platonism.[24] Secrecy, in the rhetorical form of advertised silence, is in itself significant, regardless of what it purportedly conceals; it was the Eleusinian *secrecy* which mattered in antiquity, not the 'secret'.[25]

[17] See Casel 1919, 6–13; Burkert 1983, 248–254.

[18] Th. 6.28.1; Plut. *Alc.* 19–22; cf. Casel 1919, 9.

[19] Testimonia of various versions of the story collected at Radt 1985, *Tragicorum græcorum fragmenta* III, 63 ff. Bremmer 1995, 72; cf. Burkert 1983, 252; Scarpi 1987, 32–33.

[20] E.g. Hippol. *Haer.* 5.8.39, where the Eleusinian 'secrets' are revealed. Cf. Casel 1919, 11–13. The curious story that Numenius of Apamea revealed the mysteries through an act of esoteric reading is discussed p. 112.

[21] Whether the actual *contents* of the mystic rites were secret in antiquity (argued by e.g. Mylonas 1961, 224–229, 287–288; Pépin 1984, 18–23) or not (argued by e.g. Bremmer 1995, 72–75), the proverbial and proverbially inviolable mystique of silence which surrounded the mysteries was immune to being 'revealed'. Gregory Nazianzus (*Orat.* 27 5, 21–28) shows awareness of the rhetorical function of mystic silence when he exhorts the Christian community to secrecy concerning their religion, so as not to fall short of that of the initiate 'idolaters', inasmuch as they 'bow to *daimones* and vile fables'. The pagans have no true secret of any value in Gregory's eyes, yet he wishes to emulate their practice of secrecy and silence.

[22] Cf. Scarpi 1987, 32; Martin 1995, 112.

[23] Cf. Stroumsa 1996b, 3: '… the most characteristic trait of mystery is the fact that it is announced everywhere.'

[24] See p. 70 ff.

[25] Cf. Stroumsa and Kippenberg 1995, xvi: 'Though the secrecy may originally have been merely a standard initiatory feature, it came to possess an absolute value, to the point of becoming the essence of Eleusis, independent of its initiatory rites.'

Aristotle tells us that the Eleusinian initiation was not a secret proposition to be learnt so much as an 'experience';[26] the precise meaning of the verb *pathein* here is contested, but it is safe to say that Aristotle is referring to the Eleusinian ritual itself, as opposed to the acquisition of propositional knowledge.[27] Regardless of Aristotle's intended meaning, however, this passage may well be the *locus classicus* for what became the very different idea of the mysteries' essential incommunicability arising in the first centuries CE. We have already seen this idea exploited in a philosophical register by Plotinus, involving both theological concepts of the school tradition and ideas of radical ineffability which we have every reason to believe were absent from the Classical Eleusinian mysteries.[28] In the Plotinian reading, as we have seen, the Eleusinian law of secrecy is a *philosophic* secret, pointing to the ineffability and self-hiding character of the One beyond being. What is a modern interpreter, attempting to speak from a perspective outside the initiated group of privileged esoteric readers, to make of these self-hiding secrets?

A second problem arises from the attempt to interpret apophatic language and other literary techniques with which Plotinus approaches this self-hiding wisdom or truth. Apophatic discussions are, in a sense, the practical concomitant of the concept of a self-hiding truth; like the purported wisdom of the mysteries, truth remains inviolate no matter how often it is 'revealed'. Apophatic negations are at least partly a response to a predicament arising within philosophical dialectic – the problem of logical 'unsayability' – but they tend to change the rules of discourse in ways that may take it out of the purview of what is normally considered philosophic dialectic. This is a problem for the truth-claims of philosophic statements, and must be addressed.

A final problem is that of interpreting experience, which becomes especially important when approaching authors for whom, unlike for Aristotle, experience was a potential locus for encountering an ineffable and transcendent reality. The ritual *pathos* of the mysteries, which must be kept secret, is translated into the ineffable encounter of 'mysticism', which keeps itself secret. Plotinus is perhaps the classic example of such an author in the Greek corpus, and some measure must be taken of the ability of scholarship

[26] Aristotle draws a distinction between *mathein*, the normal acquisition of knowledge, and *pathein*, usually translated as 'experience': καθάπερ Ἀριστοτέλης ἀξιοῖ τοὺς τελουμένους οὐ μαθεῖν τι δεῖν ἀλλὰ παθεῖν καὶ διατεθῆναι, δηλονότι γεγομένους ἐπιτηδείους (Synes. *Dio* 10.48a = *de philosophia* fr. 15 Ross); but see p. 36.

[27] As e.g. Mortley 1986, I, 114; Armstrong 1990a, 83; cf. Bremmer 1995, 72.

[28] Cf. Casel 1919, 13.

to access the experiential realms evoked in the *Enneads*. Let us expand on each of these problems in turn.

The Self-hiding Claims of Platonist Wisdom

Plato was an author who hid behind complex literary masks. His decision to avoid both the philosophical prose style which had arisen as a serious medium for systematic exposition in such authors as Democritus and Anaxagoras, as well as the visionary poetic approach of Parmenides and Empedocles, choosing instead to invent a novel form of philosophical dramaturgy (while incorporating the aims and many of the techniques of both the Presocratic poets and the more 'systematic' philosophers) serves in itself to 'hide' the author.[29] Plato's techniques stand in stark contrast to the relatively straightforward expository writings of contemporaries like Isocrates and Xenophon, in that he refuses to 'lay his cards on the table'. We may add to this the fact that Plato's Socrates is both a literary construct and a historical figure, one known personally to many of the members of Plato's contemporary audience but who also serves to some degree as a Platonic mouthpiece. Taking this *persona* into account, as well as the aporetic character of much in the dialogues and their deployment of 'Socratic' irony, we may well agree with the Seventh Platonic Epistle, regardless of its authorship, that Plato never wrote his true doctrine down, and never would.[30] Plato himself appears only once in the dialogues, at *Phd.* 59b, where it is mentioned that he had not been present at Socrates' final interview with his companions on account of an illness. His sole appearance is thus an absence.

The (perhaps irreducible) disagreement of modern interpreters over what Plato meant is a testament to this literary situation: all the really burning questions of Platonic scholarship, such as that of Plato's doctrine (or absence thereof), the chronological order of the dialogues and the extent and nature of Socratic irony, are made more intractable by Plato's literary choice to write drama and to hide behind multiple *personae*. The question of interpretation is made yet more problematic by Platonic written disparagements of writing as means of conveying truth.[31] All these facts of Platonic text might lead, and have led, readers to posit a circumspect approach on Plato's part, or even kind of 'coded language' with regard

[29] On the problem of the Platonic 'voice', see Scolnicov 2002 *passim*. Cf. Ausland 2002, 69–71 for a strong statement of the fictional character of all Platonic writing (even the Epistles).

[30] *Ep. VII* 341c–344d.

[31] To the Seventh Epistle passage cited above may be adduced *Phaedr.* 274b–277a; *Prt.* 329a; 347e; and (the probably spurious) *Ep. II* 312d7-e1. See p. 69 ff.

to expressing the higher truths of philosophy. Indeed, the elitist Platonic secrecy posited by Casel, that Plato *sermone tecto utitur, ut res sublimiores et divinas profanis occultet*,[32] is an idea which has held wide currency from antiquity until modern times.[33]

For the late antique Platonists, Plato is without question a dogmatic author who used various techniques to hide his true meaning from the vulgar (often termed 'the uninitiated'). Plato's Socrates, for them, sometimes simply disappears; it is a startling fact that, throughout the *Enneads*, Socrates appears by name fewer than ten times, and then not *in propria persona* but as the traditional cypher for 'Everyman'.[34] The question is no longer whether or not Plato had any established teachings at all (as it had been during the sceptical Academic period, and has again become in some modern scholarship) but rather what, exactly, those teachings had been. The aporetic dialogues are read not as a call to deep-seated doubt about all supposed first principles but as a set of attacks aimed at specific false doctrines (the criteria of truth and falsehood, again, being a point of argument among Platonists).

In what must be one of the great examples of 'reading against the grain' afforded by the history of letters, in the Late Platonism of Plotinus and his successors the cautions of the Second and Seventh Platonic Epistles against reading a doctrine into the dialogues becomes a canonical hermeneutic principle, but one which reads Plato's statements of secrecy not as outright denials of having written the truth, but as evidence that he *hid* the truth. In other words, these cautions were themselves esoteric statements, signs to the initiated reader of a subtext to be found in the dialogues. Whatever the historical intent of Plato may have been, the Platonic written attack on writing becomes, for the later Platonists, a strong motif of written silence, whose paradoxical character is embraced and exploited.[35] This tendency to read Plato as a secretive author begins to appear in the Middle Platonists, and with Plotinus and subsequent Platonists it takes on a powerful new character.

[32] Casel 1919, 37; cf. 36–40.

[33] E.g. Numen. fr. 23; D. L. 3. 63; Sallust. *de de. et mun*. III 4.11-15; August. *Contra Ac.* 3.37–43; Giambattista Vico, *Autobiography* (1963, 139); Taylor 1804, Vol. 3 p. 3; Strauss 1988; Krämer 1959, 25 ff., 401, 457; Burkert 1972, 19–20. Needless to say, the specific parameters of Plato's esotericism are drawn differently by each of these authors; the constant element is the idea of writing *more platonico* (Leo Suavius, *Theophrasti Paracelsi . . . compendium* 170, quoted at Walker 1975, 102) which contains a subtext available only to the privileged reader.

[34] Noted by Szlezák 1979, 44. Plato's name appears more than five times as often, and his works are cited without explicit reference to their author hundreds of times (see the *index fontium* in H + S 1, vol. III, 448–457).

[35] Cf. Rappe 2000, 122.

The rise of the 'silent Plato' is discussed in the following chapter; for the moment, however, it is enough to point out that the reading of Plato outlined here leads to serious interpretative difficulties for modern readers. We are faced with what has been called the 'double-bind of secrecy': 'If one "knows", one cannot speak, and if one speaks, one must not really know'.[36] This rhetorical situation leads inevitably to internal paradoxes such as those to be found in the Plotinian passage cited above, where the true wisdom (in this case hidden 'within' the mystery tradition) cannot, on the one hand, be revealed to those who do not know it already, and need not, on the other, be revealed to those who do, since they are initiates.

In the Late Platonist tradition of reading Plato, a form of reading which many of the Platonists routinely compare to mystic initiation,[37] the reader is often confronted with the seeming impossibility of discovering what the author is talking about. The secret is, by definition, unavailable to such outsiders as modern Classical scholars. And finally, this mode of reading is applied by Plotinus not only to Plato, but to a larger textual and non-textual tradition, as we have seen in the case of Plotinus' 'reading' the mysteries of Hellenic antiquity as repositories of hidden philosophic wisdom. Not only Plato, but 'the ancients' (οἱ παλαιοί) and their pre-philosophic counterparts, the ancient sages (οἱ σοφοί), expressed their truths in terms of secrecy and ineffability; the very difficulty, often, in determining which 'ancients' an author such as Plotinus is referring to adds another level to the layers of secrecy constructed around the transmission of truth.

Apophatic Discourse and Rational Cognition

We turn now to the problem of interpreting apophatic language, and extreme negativity more generally. The term 'apophasis' is derived from the Greek ἀπό + φημι: 'unsaying'. It is generally applied to a specific set of literary techniques arising during the first centuries CE, as writers of the period began to grapple with the problem of expressing the paradoxical nature of the transcendent absolute which their world-views demanded.[38] The

[36] Urban 1998, 209. Cf. Gershom Scholem's first 'unhistorical aphorism' on Kabbala (Scholem 1973, 264).

[37] See p. 106.

[38] The problem of expressing paradox and of the limitations of language vis à vis reality is at least as old as Parmenides (see Mortley 1986, vol. I, 7 *et passim*), but the particular literary mode under discussion here seems to have developed concurrently with the rise of 'strong' expressions of transcendence (see p. 150 ff.; cf. Sells 1994, 3–4; 20–21).

history of the development of the concept in philosophy of a hypostasis or entity which is ineffable in the formal, logical sense, since it transcends all the predications which can be applied to it by limited human reason, will be sketched out below.[39] Of present concern is the mode of speaking or writing which philosophers of a Platonist and Neopythagorean bent developed in order to speak of this unspeakable absolute. Aware to varying degrees of the kind of paradox underlying the previous sentence, these thinkers realised that, while no positive statement concerning the absolute could be formally true, negative statements had a better chance at truth-giving and might even help to inculcate some valid knowledge, if not of the transcendent itself, at least of its parameters. The way a blank portion on a map tells nothing of the nature of the terrain it covers but allows a viewer to locate it with regard to the surrounding terrain and to say with certitude which places it is *not* is perhaps a useful metaphor for this undertaking.[40]

Returning for the moment to the examples quoted from *Ennead* VI.8 on page 5, we find a relatively straightforward specimen of the genre: the One is the origin of all noble and majestic things, and yet not their origin (8.8-9); it is wholly unrelated to anything (13–14) and yet related to everything as the principle of all (9.6 and ff.). True apophasis, to differentiate it from simple negation of the common type '*b* states that *a* is false or otherwise contradicts *a*, therefore *a* is false', must result in a situation of non-predication or indeterminacy. True apophatic language, as I understand it in what follows, having made predicative statement *a* ('The One is the source of all good and noble things') must gainsay this statement with *b* ('The One is not their origin') in such a way that neither *a* nor *b* is finally true or false; the meaning event remains suspended between predicative options, and this tension is never resolved.[41] A further characteristic of apophatic language is that it may be endlessly iterated: *a* is contradicted by *b*, which is then in turn contradicted by *c* and *d*, theoretically *ad infinitum*; the chain of indeterminacy never comes to rest, and so need never end.

Apophasis may also be applied recursively to the act of utterance itself; Augustine of Hippo, having discussed the contradictions inherent in his doctrine of the Trinity, asks,

[39] See Chapters 3 and 4.

[40] Cf. Trouillard 1976, 308; Mortley 1986, I, 110: 'Just as that which is absent in a painting can sometimes be more significant than that which is represented, so words came to be seen as directing attention to something which they themselves fail to capture.'

[41] Cf. Sells 1994, whose anatomy of the structures of apophatic language in Plotinus and others is important for the present discussion.

> Have I said or uttered anything worthy of God? Far from it, I feel that I have done nothing other than wished to speak, and if nevertheless I have spoken, I did not want to say this [which I said]. How do I know this, except inasmuch as God is ineffable? But whatever was said by me would not have been said, if he were ineffable. And for this reason God is not to be called even ineffable (*ne ineffabilis quidem dicendus est deus*), since, when this is said, something is said. And some kind of contradiction in terms (*pugna verborum*) arises, since if that is ineffable which cannot be said, it is not ineffable since it can be said to be ineffable. This contradiction in terms would be better allayed by attending to silence than through speech.[42]

Here, as often, the apophatic denial of speech contains a direct appeal to the silence which it itself breaks, a trope discussed further below.[43] Plotinus also sometimes suggests, in written form, that it would have been better to have kept silence (e.g. VI.8[39]11.1 ff.), or alludes to a state of silence which transcends his text and which his text cannot express (e.g. VI.8[39]9.34-35). He also applies apophatic methods to his own discourse in a more subtle, but equally paradoxical way as we see here in Augustine; his text sometimes unsays not only the ineffable One, but also the very act of saying the One.[44]

Some of the difficulties for the scholar in approaching the philosophic use of apophasis, extreme negativity and related techniques for the expressing and 'disexpressing' of the transcendent are readily apparent. The first difficulty has already arisen in the previous sentence, namely the fact that the word 'transcendent' is a conventional predicate, although it signifies 'something' which is not. Despite such tricks as coining words like 'disexpressing', the liberal employment of scare quotes, or refusing the common capitalisation of 'the One' as implying a theism which is absent from Plotinus' characterisation of that hypostasis, discourse, or at least scholarly discourse, cannot escape the trap of predication imposed by language and discursive thinking. While these tricks do serve a purpose in acting as markers which remind the reader that something other than the ordinary type of subject is under discussion, and are similar to some techniques used by late antique philosophers themselves,[45] they do not themselves

[42] August. *de doct. Christ.* I, 6. This passage perhaps echoes *Enn.* V.3[49]14.16-19: ἀλλά τι κρεῖττον τούτου, ὃ λέγομεν «ὄν», ἀλλὰ καὶ πλέον καὶ μεῖζον ἢ λεγόμενον, ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς κρείττων λόγου καὶ νοῦ καὶ αἰσθήσεως, παρασχὼν ταῦτα, οὐκ αὐτὸς ὢν ταῦτα.

[43] See p. 140.

[44] This methodology is addressed in Chapter 7 through a close reading of a section from Treatise 32.

[45] See for example the top heavy 'hyperunsayings' (ὑπεραποφάσεσιν) by which Proclus indicates negation which aims at surpassing normal thought and language (Proc. *In Parm.* VII 1172.27), the ultimate unknowing, (ὑπεράγνοια), with which Damascius indicates that we cannot know the ineffable (since 'unknowable' is a term which is itself simply the opposite of knowable, thus

constitute apophatic technique in the full sense in which the present discussion construes the term.

Michael Sells has characterised apophatic language as a refusal of predication expressed through literary means; it is not confined only to the denial of specific attributes to its 'subject', but is concerned with denying the subject itself.[46] We have seen this in Plotinus' stripping the One even of the appellation 'one'. As Pierre Hadot remarks,[47] the apophatic approach to transcendence should preclude its common characterisation as 'negative theology', since theology treats of 'God' and apophasis characteristically treats of no determined referent. While an author who employs apophatic language may have a generally 'theistic' approach, as do the writers of certain *Hermetica* and some of the authors usually called 'Gnostics',[48] true apophasis will always constitute a deconstruction of theism. Many readers of such theistic apophatic writers have taken the easy way out and simply posited a formally unknowable God as it were hiding behind the 'God' of the theologians, but to do so is to betray the indeterminacy upon which apophatic writing insists;[49] indeed, later Platonists like Iamblichus and Damascius, who posited an as-it-were even more transcendent One beyond the already-transcendent first principle of Plotinus, might be seen as similarly missing the point of the Plotinian style of apophatic discourse.[50] Sells' statement that 'The commentator on apophatic language finds himself struggling with the same difficulties that haunt the original text'[51] should be taken as the first axiom of critical reading of apophasis. Sells theorises an 'apophatic pact' between writer and reader, whereby the usual grammatical and logical relations of statements are temporarily suspended in

conceptually commensurate to it, and so inadequate; Dam. *Pr.* I, 25, 13–21), or the hyperinflation of language whereby the Pseudo-Dionysius adds ὑπερ- to every adjective within reach.

[46] 'The result is an open-ended dynamic that strains against its own reifications and ontologies – a language of disontology.' Sells 1994, 7.

[47] Hadot 1981, 185.

[48] For problems of terminology in discussing Gnosticism, see n. 101.

[49] Cf. Sells 1994, 12 and n. 27.

[50] Damascius posits a further One beyond the One, characterised as utterly ineffable (πάντη ἄρρητος), a doctrine which he attributes to Iamblichus in that author's lost *Chaldæan Theology* (*Pr.* II.1). 'The Ineffable' (τὸ ἀπόρρητον) thus becomes a kind of official title for this first reality. This procedure of course leads to a perhaps unintended reification of the principle in question since, as we have seen, to name the ineffable is to betray its ineffability. Plotinus' more subtle and fluid approach to the first principle may thus be seen as a more satisfactory method for dealing with the ineffable in a literary context than this later approach. On the 'totally ineffable' first principle in Iamblichus, see Dillon 1973, 29–33; in Damascius, see Dillon 1996; Ahbel-Rappe 2010, xix–xx.

[51] Sells 1994, 8. Cf. Derrida 1992, 83; Armstrong 1973, 184: 'If one does not find doing negative theology a fairly agonizing business, one is not really doing negative theology at all.'

reading apophatic material, much as readers of poetry accept syntactical ambiguities and other anomalies foreign to prose.[52]

But it is not enough to characterise apophatic discourse; for a complete account of the *silentium philosophorum* in an author like Plotinus, this discourse should be rendered susceptible to philosophic analysis (that is, we must be able to evaluate the truth-claims of an apophatic statement). The problem for scholarship, as Sells rightly indicates, is a classic dilemma: on the one hand, a simple repetition of the negations used by an author has no explanatory value, and on the other, to translate apophatic statements into kataphatic (conventionally descriptive) language risks losing the meaning-event created by the apophatic elocution.[53] Apophatic language keeps its referent undefined at all costs; a scholarly account of it should in theory attempt in some way to do the same.

Two further difficulties may be added. Firstly, conventional statements may themselves have a technical apophatic character, often unbeknownst to their authors or audience: innocuous-seeming statements such as 'I can't even tell you what a day I've had. It was indescribably awful', taken in their performative context, actually serve to transmit meaning through the act of denying the possibility of transmitting it.[54] The problem of meaning in statements of silence is thus more intransigent, because more ubiquitous, than if it were simply a question of a literary genre of apophasis with its own particular conventions. Secondly, the wider problem of meaning in language, at the centre of so much modern philosophy, demands answers to questions about the basic status of utterance; if all signs are defined only in terms of other signs, and never finally referable to the things themselves which they purport to designate, language itself becomes an apophatic web of shifting meanings that never come to rest.[55] A further aspect of this problem is that, just as St. Augustine turns the apophatic movement of negation against his own apophatic statements about the Trinity, so any description of apophatic language itself is itself a betrayal of the interior logic of apophasis; even the *description* of the ineffable is, by its own tendency, ineffable.[56]

[52] Sells 1994, 17.

[53] Sells 1994, 16. See *ibid.* 15–19 for a good discussion of the problem as a whole.

[54] Cf. Smart 1978, 18. There is an obvious difference in referent (or non-referent) between such statements and the concerns of theologians; nevertheless the similarity on the level of speech-act between such everyday apophaticisms and works of Classical apophasis is significant and problematic.

[55] See Trouillard 1976, 311; Wolfson 2005, xiv for reading as an apophatic act. The important essay of Derrida (1987, English translation 1992) on apophatic theological texts is an essential exploration of the results of applying such an understanding of language in general directly to apophatic language. On the 'apophatic turn' in some modern philosophy, see Franke 2005. With reference to late Platonism specifically, see Gersh 2007; Franke 2008; Appendix D, p. 272.

[56] Cf. Derrida 1992, 5–6.

The Problem of a Model of 'Mysticism' and of Theorising the Interior

In attempting to understand the historical context of Plotinus' language of transcendence, interpreters inevitably encounter the stumbling-block of 'mysticism'. Dodds identifies the assumption, 'That the Neoplatonists, being "mystics", were necessarily incomprehensible to the plain man or even to the plain philosopher,' as one of the primary errors besetting scholarship of late Platonism.[57] But when the historical precedents for positing a transcendent absolute are tabulated, the influence of religious ideas explored and all other possible contextual and ideological concerns dealt with, readers of Plotinus may still feel themselves at an *impasse*: Plotinus' writing of the silence beyond the end of *logos*, his literary exploration of the edges of the field of discursive thinking, always falls short of saying the unsayable goal of his philosophy, and many interpreters see this goal as embodied in, and perhaps arising from, ineffable experiences which the philosopher underwent.[58] Porphyry tells us that Plotinus not only attained *noêsis*, the union with perfect, timeless thought which bridges the gap between normal thinking and the radical unthinkable which is the One or Good, but four times passed beyond this state into contact with the One, not merely in theory, but in 'unspeakable (or ineffable) reality' (ἐν ἐνεργείᾳ ἀῤῥήτῳ).[59]

Understandably, modern interpreters have often set aside the idea of an experiential side to Plotinus' philosophical project, a 'mysticism' which is inaccessible to rational analysis because it is based in experiences which cannot be put into words. There are a number of implicit assumptions in this approach which require unpacking. The first is the relatively modern assumption that there exists something called 'mysticism' conceived as an experiential, transcultural constant which various mystics of different cultural backgrounds share; this idea has come under serious criticism on two main counts.

Firstly, it has been forcefully argued that this idea of mysticism is in fact the product of outmoded comparative ideal-types which have been severely questioned in religious studies,[60] and further that these ideal-types are partly the product of Christian and post-Christian discourse and

[57] Dodds 1928, 129.

[58] See Hadot 2001, 134. The idea that the Plotinian philosophy of transcendence arose (at least in part) from Plotinus' transcendental experiences has been assumed to be the case by many interpreters; it was put forward as a strong claim by Geffcken (Geffcken 1929, 47–50); see, n. 68, for its survival in a qualified form in more modern scholarship.

[59] *Plot.* 23 16–18.

[60] See Mazur 2010, 7–8 for a conspexus.

thus inappropriate for the critical interpretation of non-Christian traditions.[61] Secondly, it has been argued that this idea of mysticism posits 'experience' in a scientifically untenable way. A reified, cross-cultural mysticism based in the idea that all mystical experience is essentially the same, with individual mystics' reports differing only because of their particular social and ideological conditions, has been a powerful interpretative idea in nineteenth- and twentieth-century study of religions and philosophy,[62] but evidence shows that mystics do in fact disagree fundamentally as to the nature of their experiences, and there is a certain arrogance in ignoring their claims. Meanwhile, the existence of a primordial experience preceding sociolinguistic conditioning has been severely questioned, although this question cannot be said to have been definitively closed one way or the other.[63] Lastly, on the logical level, apophatic literature describes no subject to be experienced; if every experience is an experience of something, whether of an affect, an object, or something else, then the moment of apophatic 'union' which is the classic *locus* for 'mystical experience', cannot *a priori* be an experience.[64] Finally, whether or not such experience does exist, it is not difficult to argue that it is inaccessible, by definition, to analysis, and thus an inappropriate subject of study in the humanities. The existence of mystical states of consciousness is a valid and fascinating subject of inquiry, but humanistic scholarship can seemingly only concern itself with describing the description rather than positing an unknowable origin for it.[65]

Plotinian scholars within Classics have also rightly argued that the terms 'mystic', 'mystical' and their cognates are anachronistic in the Plotinian context.[66] Plotinus himself uses the term μυστικῶς only once, in a context clearly denoting its usual significance in antiquity, namely the concept

[61] Cf. Keller 1978, 75–76; Proudfoot 1985, 185; Mazur 2003, 30–31; Mazur 2010, 9–10. Hadot traces this modern sense of 'mysticism', that of 'une connaisance expérimentale de Dieu qui se réalise par un embrassement d'amour unitif', to the *de theologia mystica lectiones sex* of Jean Gerson, the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century French theologian (Hadot 1986a, 274). Proudfoot traces a similar idea of mysticism to Schleiermacher and subsequent developments in Western religious thinking (Proudfoot 1985, 2–40).

[62] E.g. Stace 1961, 18. See bibliography at Katz 1978, 67, n. 5; see further Wasserstrom 1999, 239–241; Mazur 2010, 9, n. 29. The concept of 'experience' as it is understood today is itself an idea with a modern pedigree (see Gadamer 1981, 56–66 for a genealogy of the German term *Erlebnis*, which appears only from 1870 onward; Proudfoot 1985, 2–40).

[63] Katz argues rather forcefully that 'There are NO pure [i.e. unmediated] experiences' (Katz 1978, 26; see 25–46; see criticism at Mazur 2010, 8, n. 24); cf. Proudfoot 1977, 344; Janowitz 2002, xv-xvii.

[64] Cf. Sells 1994, 214–215.

[65] Cf. Katz 1978, 51; Proudfoot 1985, 41.

[66] E.g. Hadot 1986a, 3–6.

of a hidden meaning or an initiatory secret.[67] These arguments leave the heuristic category of mysticism in need of a new name, since the Greek equivalent of the term was current in Plotinus' time with a wholly different meaning, but otherwise intact. Others have argued that, rather than being a mystic, Plotinus was in fact a competent rationalist philosopher, or that he was both a mystic *and* a competent rationalist philosopher, the two things not being mutually exclusive.[68] The first argument, based on anachronism, points to the reasons one might wish to do away with the term 'mysticism' altogether in the study of Platonism, and the problems of definition noted above support a claim that, at the very least, the term should not be used without a strong working definition. But setting aside these problems, the Plotinian appeal to the ineffable remains, as does the historical fact that, at least in the eyes of Porphyry, this ineffable has its referent in indescribable cognitive states undergone by the philosopher,[69] and an ineffable cognitive state is by definition not susceptible to analysis.[70]

Problems and Solutions

We may now interrogate these interpretative difficulties in terms of philosophic silence as it has been outlined above. In any discussion of esoteric traditions, the double-bind of secrecy mentioned above applies: if one knows the secret, it is by definition not the secret. In discussing the Platonist esoteric traditions,[71] this book will not seek to uncover the *content* of the self-hiding wisdom of the philosophic tradition as read by the Platonists; it will not even posit such a content.[72] Plato and the ideas to which he gave life have provided particularly fertile soil in which all manner of widely divergent crops of knowledge and thought have grown, and history has shown, since the eclipse of the sceptical Academy and the rise of Platonism in its stead, that a strongly esoteric practice of reading this tradition seems

[67] III.6[1]19.26; see Sleeman and Pollet 1980 *s.v.* Cf. Arist. *EN* 3.1.1111a; Strabo 10.3.9; D.S. 1.20.6. See Casel 1919, 6; Hadot 1986b, 236–238.

[68] E.g. Rist 1967b, 213–230; Bussanich 1997 *passim*, esp. 5300, who wish to classify which type of mystic Plotinus was, according to various taxonomies of religious experience. Trouillard makes the 'Origine mystique de toute la vie de l'esprit' a defining characteristic of Neoplatonism (1976, 307) and the 'mystic state' the origin of this same spiritual life in Plotinian philosophy (1961, 433).

[69] 'Cognitive states' here is used in preference to 'experiences', not because it is any less anachronistic or un-Plotinian, but for want of an English alternative. The discussion of Plotinian anthropology in Chapter 6 comes to grips with the difficulties inherent in speaking about Plotinian states of consciousness.

[70] Katz 1978, 54–56.

[71] That is to say, the esoteric traditions constructed by the Platonists.

[72] Cf. Urban 1998, 235 ff. on the inaccessibility of 'esoteric wisdom' to scholars.

to have grown especially well. This book is not attempting the process of 'uncovering' practised by the *Tübingenschule*, nor primarily the genealogical play of ideas found in the work of Raoul Mortley and others;[73] in investigating the territory, not of the accidentally hidden truth but of the ineffable absolute, these modes of access are closed. This book repositions the enquiry so as to ask, not what is being hidden, but what is the hiding? What are its characteristics, and what is its power as a performative act in a philosophical context?

This repositioning is not an abandonment of either historical or philosophic enquiry. As will be shown, the significance of Plotinian esoteric reading lies not in finding that which is (perpetually) to be revealed, but in reading and thinking the unending process of revelation. In other words, this thesis proposes not to uncover any secrets, but to study secrecy in action, and to analyse the functions to which it is put by Platonism generally, and Plotinus specifically. In social terms, the practice of secrecy sheds important light on the engagement of Platonism with other traditions, both philosophic and religious, especially as regards Platonist attempts to lay claim to the absolute truth and to privileged status as pre-eminent philosophers. In terms of Plotinus' project, it will be shown how the philosopher's transformation of the established tropes of Platonist philosophic silence represent a new kind of secrecy, namely the self-hiding secret of the ineffable, and how Plotinus uses this secret as the motor for a powerful discourse of philosophic contemplation and transformation. The unending postponement of the revelation of the highest truth in the *Enneads* mirrors, and is perhaps meant to foster, the movement of consciousness beyond its own limits and toward the ineffable absolute. Chapter 7 in particular argues that Plotinus seeks paradoxically to reveal something of the nature of the ineffable One by using established tropes of hiding and revealing in new ways adapted to his strong philosophy of transcendence and ineffability.

Turning to the 'secrets' of Platonism, this book does not enter into the Esotericist debate. Instead, it analyses the process by which the Middle Platonists and Plotinus constructed their philosophic tradition, and read it as an esoteric tradition. The process of Plotinian exegesis of Plato has still not been done full justice in modern interpretation,[74] and his construction of

[73] On the former, see Appendix D, p. 266 ff. Mortley's work, including articles (1972; 1975; 1982; 1992) and a major, two-volume treatment (1986), constitutes the most thorough scholarly investigation of the philosophical reasons which led some Hellenic thinkers to privilege silence as 'a superior epistemological weapon to utterance' (Mortley 1986, I, 108).

[74] This is due not to any lack of excellent appreciations (such as Eon 1970; Charrue 1978; Hadot 1987; Dillon 1992), but to the depth and rhetorical complexity of Plato, and of Plotinus' reading of Plato.

a larger tradition in which Plato plays only a part, and which Plotinus treats as an equally valid source of philosophical wisdom to Plato, has been largely ignored in scholarship.[75] The exploration of esoteric reading in Plotinus which follows will do something to address this lack through elucidating the ways that hidden and secret wisdom are constructed within the canonical text (whether a written text or, as sometimes, a notional 'text') and then unfolded into the light of day, although often in a context of rhetorical hiding. Sometimes these enigmas of the ancients are discursive philosophical formations; at other times, fascinatingly, they take the form of revelations of ineffability, of silences within secrets, as we have seen in Plotinus' 'revelation' of the true meaning of the mysteries' command of silence.

In terms of dealing with apophatic language, the approach to philosophic silence followed in this book has several advantages. Apophatic writing (and the linked technique of conceptual aphairesis, the stripping-away of mental concepts which Plotinus pursues with sometimes relentless energy) concentrates the attention of the reader not on the content of discourse, but on that which it does not contain, focusing discourse on the limitations of discourse. It is a self-conscious attempt at self-transcendent writing.[76] As such, it has of course theoretical underpinnings in the ideas of language, of the self and of truth in terms of which its practitioner understands it; for Plotinus, for example, negations are in one sense a strictly discursive matter which cannot attain to *noêsis* insofar as they are couched in linguistic, and thus multiple, terms.[77] At the same time, all philosophic argumentation, for Plotinus, may be conceived as an important early stage in a grand project of *anagôgê*, the leading-up of the seeker toward the higher cognition-through-presence which is non-discursive thought and that which lies beyond it.[78] This book will attempt to give a clear account of these theoretical considerations, and to use them as a jumping-off point for investigation of the performative aspects of apophasis and aphairesis. The intention is to delineate the 'apophatic pact' between writer and reader, insofar as possible, without betraying it.

This approach avoids positing 'mysticism', the hidden reification which lies behind much modern interpretation of apophatic discourse. The

[75] Important exceptions are Eon 1970, Lamberton 1989, Boys-Stones 2001 and van Nuffelen 2011, all of which feature prominently in Chapters 3 and 4.

[76] This understanding has been pioneered by Sara Rappe (2000).

[77] See p. 180. The limitations of knowledge and discourse in Plotinus are addressed in Chapters 6 and 7.

[78] E.g. I.3[20]1.6; V.1[10]1.24; IV.8[31]1. See further p. 229 ff.

assumptions which inform this category as it is generally used, while seeming to hold out the promise of a thought-world which is itself ineffable (the world of 'mystical experience'), in fact smuggle an essentialised, predicable concept into the silent space which apophatic language perpetually circles. This book will try, and fail, to avoid substituting other concepts for mysticism; the 'ineffable absolute' mentioned on the previous page is already such a betrayal. What I hope to explore, however, are the degrees of apophatic intensity and indeterminacy of predicate by which Plotinus continually pushes against this necessary betrayal. By staying at the level of rhetoric or discourse, the level to which, Plotinus tells us, the way of negative language is confined by its divided nature, our analysis stays true to Plotinus' theories of the nature of discourse, while hopefully elucidating at least the profound difficulties of Plotinian apophasis. The silence beyond discourse is never defined, but its contours, or the way a philosophic reader positions himself toward it, are shaped by the discourse which leads up to it; it is this positioning which is a proper subject for investigation, and which constitutes the activity of philosophic silence in Plotinus.

CHAPTER 2

The Silent Philosopher

> Πολλὴν ἐπιμέλειαν ποεῖσθε περὶ τοῦ μὴ λέγειν ἃ μὴ δεῖ. παντελῶς γὰρ ἀπαιδεύτου τινος ἐστι τὸ μὴ δύνασθαι σιωπᾶν.
>
> Apollonius of Tyana, ap. Stob. I 681, 13.

Before turning to the focused thematic discussions which make up the bulk of this book, a more synoptic approach may be helpful to flesh out the theoretical considerations of the previous chapter. This discussion will bring out in concrete terms some of the ways in which philosophic silence was envisaged and practised in Plotinus' intellectual milieu of the third century CE.

Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* gives us our only detailed account of Plotinus' day to day life and teaching methods.[1] It contains several important passages with a strong bearing on philosophic silence; all are problematic, and all constitute instances of philosophic silence on Porphyry's part. These Porphyrian passages provide a useful thematic entry into the general cultural milieu of philosophic silence in the third century CE. Having discussed these passages, this chapter will delve back in time to early antiquity and the Classical period to investigate the roots of these themes and tropes of silence in early philosophy and mystery cult, and then return to the late antique period for a comparative discussion of other depictions of philosophic silence from the same era. Lastly, Porphyry's descriptions will be reassessed in the light of the intervening discussion, and our basic working model of philosophic silence will be fleshed out considerably.

The first passage occurs near the beginning of Porphyry's account. It narrates that an oath was taken by three leading students of Ammonius Saccas,[2] including Plotinus, not to reveal their teacher's doctrines.

[1] On Porphyry's biography of Plotinus, see generally Porphyry 1992; Edwards 2000, 1–53 gives an English translation with useful notes and an *index nominum* (143–147).

[2] We know almost nothing for certain about this philosopher (see Dodds 1960b). Porphyry tells us that Plotinus met him in Alexandria after much fruitless searching for a philosophic teacher and,

> An agreement had been entered into by Erennius and by Origen and by Plotinus not to reveal any of Ammonius' doctrines, doctrines which he had explained to them in his lectures. Plotinus too kept to the agreement; he did teach some of those who came forward, but he kept secret the doctrines which stemmed from Ammonius. Erennius was the first to break the agreement, and when Erennius had taken the first step Origen followed. However, he wrote nothing except the treatise *On Daimones* and, under Gallienus, *That the King is the Only Maker*. For a long time Plotinus continued to write nothing, while drawing on his studies with Ammonius for the courses of lectures that he gave. And that was how he continued for the course of ten years, teaching some people, but writing nothing.[3]

There has been some controversy over the construal of this text; are we to understand that Plotinus took an oath to keep Ammonius' doctrines secret, and then broke it when he saw that his colleagues had already done so and there was no further reason for silence? Or, as O'Brien argues, should Plotinus' direct participation in this oath be seen as a later interpolation, and his adherence to it for a time a kind of informal agreement to go along with the oath sworn by his colleagues?[4]

These are interesting questions, but a close reading of the passage shows that strict logical congruency is lacking in Porphyry's account; it simply cannot be made to yield a consistent factual message.[5] References to secrecy and silence in Platonist writing are often a signal that we should look for rhetorical concerns rather than logical ones, and so it is in this case, as I argue below.

But first, certain questions should be raised about Porphyry's text. Why, in the first place, should a group of philosophic students undertake to keep their master's doctrines a secret? And then, why, assuming the existence of such a secret, should the writing down of Ammonius' doctrines,

upon hearing Ammonius' discourse, said 'This is the man I sought!' and thereafter pursued his studies under Ammonius (*Plot*. 3 13–15).

[3] Porph. *Plot*. 3 24–35. Translation O'Brien 1994, 131–132. O'Brien brackets 'and Plotinus' in the first line as a gloss (*ibid*. 123–125), an amendment which is not essential to the present discussion. On this passage see O'Brien 1992; Cherlonneix 1992; O'Brien 1994.

[4] O'Brien 1994, 118–121 discusses the principle scholarly interpretations of this passage.

[5] Plotinus at first 'kept secret the doctrines that stemmed from Ammonius'; then, without any segué, we learn that he 'continued to write nothing, while drawing on his studies with Ammonius'. The locus of secrecy has silently been moved from an absolute silence to silence with regard to written works. O'Brien 1994 notes many of these contradictions but, again, seeks to find an answer to the problem of what Porphyry means without reference to the rhetorics of philosophic silence employed in this passage. I argue below that what concerns Porphyry here is the attribution to Plotinus of known *themes* of philosophic silence: the trope of 'the secret revealed', and the trope of privileged orality and the rhetorical denigration of the written word.

specifically, break the oath? There are clearly assumptions at work here about what kind of philosophic information is to be transmitted and how the transmission is to be carried out.

A second passage with bearing on these questions appears in the next section of the *Life*. Having arrived in Rome and set up his philosophic school, Plotinus had for some time conducted his seminars without writing any treatises. At some point, however, he gave in to pressure and began to write:

> Now, Plotinus had been prevailed upon to write down occasional debates from the first year of Gallienus' reign, and in the tenth year of that reign, when I, Porphyry, came to know him, he had written twenty-one books, which however he gave out to few, keeping them back [from the public]. For the circulation [of these texts] was not at all indiscriminate, nor was he easy in his mind about it, nor was it a straightforward and simple matter; rather, it was carried out after a complete vetting of the recipients.[6]

Why should Plotinus have been reluctant to put the results of his seminars in written form, and why, when 'prevailed upon' to do so, did he distribute them uneasily (οὐδὲ εὐσυνειδήτως), a phrase which might also be translated 'with a bad conscience'? Taking these two passages together, it is clear that the question of privilege in philosophic knowledge is bound up in Porphyry's estimation with the question of indiscriminate publication.

Let us consider another episode from Porphyry, this time bearing on quite a different aspect of philosophic esotericism. Plotinus' philosophic group celebrated festivals in honour of Plato and Socrates, as was the general philosophic custom.[7] Porphyry read out a poem at the festival of Plato, and records his auditors' reactions:

> When I read a poem at the festival of Plato entitled 'The Sacred Marriage', one of those present said 'Porphyry is raving', on account of the many things said in a veiled manner (μυστικῶς) and in the esoteric language of divine possession (μετ' ἐνθουσιασμοῦ ἐπικεκρυμμένως). But Plotinus said in the hearing of all: 'You have shown yourself at once a poet, a philosopher and a hierophant (ἔδειξας ὁμοῦ καὶ τὸν ποιητὴν καὶ τὸν φιλόσοφον καὶ τὸν ἱεροφάντην).'[8]

[6] Porph. *Plot*. 4 9–16. Cf. *Plot*. 18 20–24 on the persuasion used by Porphyry and Amelius to induce Plotinus to write.

[7] *Plot*. 2 41. On this practice see Plut. *quaest. conv.* 717b.

[8] *Plot.* 15 1–6.

What does Porphyry mean here by μυστικῶς? The most basic meaning of this term is 'pertaining to mystery cult', but it had long come to indicate 'concerned with or pertaining to secrecy'.[9] Porphyry's poem, then, contained wording which hinted at a meaning, or a secret, not made explicit, perhaps with some reference to the dichotomy of initiated and uninitiated. As for ἐπικεκρυμμένως, it is difficult to find a better translation than 'esoterically': the term denotes intentional concealment.[10] In conjunction with μετ' ἐνθουσιασμοῦ, it is probably meant to evoke the obscurity of oracles or other inspired speech, familiar to the Greek imagination. The trope of obscure, inspired speech implied truth (since its inspiration was thought to be divine), but also a certain difficulty in accessing that truth: oracles were obscure and required interpreters (hierophants, to whom Plotinus compares Porphyry in this passage), and notoriously fraught with difficulty, often revealing their true meaning too late to be of any use, or sometimes, by warning the recipient of a threatening doom, bringing that very doom about.[11]

Here we have another register of philosophic silence. The incident surrounding Porphyry's poem does not present themes of guarding knowledge from unsupervised or careless distribution; instead, it presents a public declaration of the hidden knowledge, but expressed in such a way that it remains hidden. In fact, it is a claim to esotericism on Porphyry's part, a rare claim for a Platonist, since they are much more given to finding esotericism in the works of 'the ancients' and to styling themselves as 'exegetes' than to attributing esoteric expression to themselves.[12] This message is 'hidden in plain sight', since the less astute, unnamed audience-member expresses a total lack of appreciation for it, while the perceptive Plotinus sees its true value and, it is implied, its inner meanings. Such a model of exposition intentionally avoids philosophic ἀκριβεῖα; it expresses through hiding, rather than through exegesis or explanation. But why would a philosopher have recourse to themes from the mystery cults, 'oracular' language, or other tropes of secrecy derived from religion? This is perhaps the question implied by the unnamed detractor of Porphyry, who may perhaps represent a more sober strain of Platonist thinking. Plotinus' answer,

[9] See p. 47 ff.

[10] LSJ translates 'mysteriously', and gives no other occurrences of this word. But see *s.v.* ἐπικρύπτω.

[11] The oracle which misled Croesus in Herodotus (I.55) is a well-known example of the former, and the oracle which led Oedipus to kill his father and marry his mother (S. *O.T.* 791–3) of the latter. Plutarch thought that oracles were obscure because the gods themselves wished to speak esoterically, an interesting permutation of Platonist theory of esoteric expression discussed n. 70.

[12] Plotinus, for example, never claims to be an esoteric writer, but rather declares the 'openness' of his exposition (discussed Chapter 4).

that one could be 'at once a poet, a philosopher and an expounder of sacred matters', shows an understanding of philosophic practice wherein themes of the esoteric drawn from religion provide a suitable element of exposition.

The final Porphyrian passage for discussion has been alluded to in the Introduction. This is Porphyry's claim that Plotinus attained to the state of union with the One 'in ineffable actuality'.

> And so, often strongly spurred on by this spiritual light (δαιμονίῳ φωτὶ) toward the first and transcendent god in his thoughts, and according to the ways of ascent taught in Plato's *Symposium*, that god appeared which has neither shape nor Form, but is established above *nous* and the entire noetic [reality]. And I, Porphyry, declare that I once drew near and was united (ἑνωθῆναι) to it, in my sixty-eighth year.[13] So the goal appeared to Plotinus, being not far removed. For his end and goal was to become one with and to draw near to the god which is above all things. And it happened four times, when I was in his presence, that he [attained to] this goal, not only *in potentia*, but in ineffable actuality.[14]

In the Late Platonist milieu, not only educational and cultural criteria determine philosophic eminence, but also states of internal power. Porphyry describes a type of inward attention exercised by Plotinus, linked to ascetic practices: 'He was present both to himself and to others, and he never relaxed this self-directed attention except in sleep; and this he reduced by taking little food – often he ate not even a piece of bread – and by his constant turning (ἐπιστοφή) toward his intellect.'[15] A little further on, Porphyry reiterates this mental discipline: 'He never relaxed the intensity [of his attention] toward the intellect.'[16] Plotinus is depicted as engaged in a strict philosophic regime, resulting in an almost constant connection to *nous*, and an occasional breakthrough to the highest reality. Porphyry also attacks certain Gnostics in Plotinus' group for 'deceiving themselves and others by claiming that Plato had not penetrated to the depths of noetic being'; clearly, the claim to such states of inner power could be contested, and to do so was an important part of philosophic disputation.[17]

The significance of this will appear later, but we may note for the moment how the depiction of states of internal power such as these brings

[13] Or 'I, Porphyry, now in my sixty-eighth year, andc.'
[14] *Plot.* 23 7–18. The final καὶ οὐ δυνάμει is rejected as a gloss by Volkmann and others.
[15] *Ibid.* 8 19–23.
[16] *Ibid.* 9 17–18.
[17] *Ibid.* 16.1–10.

an element of the unsayable into philosophic achievement. Plotinus' inner states cannot be analysed, unless by their fruits in the sphere of dialectic, and the highest achievement, union with the One, cannot be addressed even there, being ineffable. Late Platonist philosophic silence elevates such 'silent' states of inner achievement to the highest importance in philosophic practice, and thus removes the culmination of philosophy from the sphere of discourse.

These four passages from Porphyry are all instances of philosophic silence; in each case, a statement or act implies the existence of a secret, while rhetorically denying access to the secret. Note, again, that this is not a case of the actual preservation of a secret in the strict and logically obvious sense: in the case of Ammonius' teachings, it is implied that all three thinkers broke the oath of secrecy, and we have every reason to believe that one result of this betrayal, to the lasting good of posterity, was the *Enneads*. Plotinus' initially hesitant and careful publication gave way to an open and prolific distribution of his texts throughout the Roman intellectual world;[18] nor should we ignore the apparent irony that it was Porphyry himself who was responsible for editing and publishing Plotinus' works as a corpus.

As for Porphyry's esoteric poem, it is an example of how the open secret, the self-hiding esoteric, could operate, or be seen to operate, in a very concrete social fashion. The purported secret meanings are not the significant point of the anecdote, or not the only significant point; what is important, and what Porphyry himself emphasises in a rather self-aggrandising fashion, is the status conferred by Plotinus' recognition of the true, hidden worth of his poem. Just as initiation conferred a certain status on the initiand, so esoteric interpretation, drawing on the same powerful tropes of belonging and exclusion, conferred a kind of solidarity and social capital. But the presence of the secret had to be stated 'in the hearing of all' for this to occur; as always, the revealing of the hiding constitutes the key dynamic of the esoteric. The final passage may seem an odd one out, ostensibly dealing as it does with a private – indeed, silent – inner state of the philosopher. But the mere fact of Porphyry's reportage shows beautifully the way that such inner accomplishments could translate into symbolic capital, as

[18] There was at least one other edition of Plotinus' works in circulation (by Plotinus' student Eustochius; see Armstrong 2003, I, ix), and a request for copies by Longinus (Porph. *Plot.* 19) seems to indicate that they could be had for the asking by someone considered by Plotinus to be not a true philosopher, but merely a cultivated man (*ibid.* 14 18–20). While Eustochius' and Porphyry's editions were published after Plotinus' death, Longinus' request suggests an active copying tradition during Plotinus' lifetime (but after 268 CE; see Edwards 2000, 33 n. 189). It is at any rate certain that Plotinus' works circulated far and wide after his death; they were known to Augustine in western Africa and at least as far east as Baghdad, whence they entered into the Islamic world (see Adamson 2002, 3).

Porphyry's mention, 'in passing', of his own, similar achievement indicates.[19] Plotinus' status as possessor of the supreme philosophic achievement is being emphasised here, and its ineffability acts precisely as does the theme of mystic silence – to heighten the importance of the achievement, and to elevate it and keep it out of the reach of the uninitiated.

Presocratic Roots of Philosophic Silence

We have posed several questions: What concerns of privileged knowledge lie behind the oath of secrecy and its betrayal? Why would Plotinus seek strictly to control the publication of his works? Why would a Platonist author such as Porphyry choose to express himself in public in an intentionally obscure or secretive manner? Porphyry's biography itself asks none of these questions; the answers are assumed to be self-evident to his readers. The following sections will examine the background behind this assumption and try to make them evident to modern readers, by providing the framework for a model of philosophic silence in the third-century Platonist milieu. Three sections follow, examining the most important thematic and philosophical loci for Platonist philosophic silence – the mystery cults, the traditions of silence stemming from the Italian Presocratics (especially those surrounding Pythagoras and his school) and the works of Plato himself – after which the discussion will return to the late antique silent philosopher.

The Mysteries

The mystery cults, especially the cult at Eleusis, provided the most ancient and enduring *topos* of silence to the Hellenic mind throughout antiquity and even into the Christian period.[20] The subject of ancient mystery religion is vast,[21] and little more can be done here than mention a few of the

[19] On Porphyry's self-aggrandisement in the *Life*, see Edwards 2000, xxxvi and n. 109.

[20] See the excellent comments of Pépin 1984, 25 ff. Cf. still Casel 1919, 1–2 *et passim*. Burkert 1987, 4: The mysteries of Eleusis were the local cult of Athens, and much of their iconic significance probably stems from the literary prestige of that city. Casel's thesis, that *philosophorum silentium e mysteriis originem ducere* (1919, 1–2 *et passim*), has much to recommend it if understood on the level of imagery and rhetoric; however, philosophy also developed its own concerns of secrecy and silence quite apart from those derived from the mystic materials which they appropriated, as discussed in Part II of this book.

[21] Metzger 1984 is a huge bibliography. Burkert 1983 and 1987 are excellent studies. Of importance to the question of mystic silence and its appropriation by philosophy generally are Casel 1919, 1–6; Burkert 1983, 248–254. The Latin equivalents of mystic terminology given below often first appear later than the Classical period under discussion, but are included for the sake of completeness; on this Latin terminology see Graf 2003, 4.

most salient points and note the specific vocabulary associated with the mysteries; the adoption and transformation of mystery themes and terms by Platonism are discussed in some detail in the following chapter.

The mysteries were '… initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred.'[22] To this phenomenological description, however, should be added the more concrete fact that the mysteries conferred a change of *status* through the act of initiation.[23] A chief distinguishing social feature of mysteries, and of the Hellenic and Roman private societies (θίασοι / *collegia*) which shared much of their terminology, structure and style,[24] was that they constituted an aspect of formal religion outside the public sphere. Their basic structure was one of exclusion and inclusion, in contrast to the public rituals of ancient Greece and Rome. The key to this dynamic was the status conferred by initiation, most often referred to by the verb μυεῖν (to initiate, Lat. *initiare*) and its cognates, whence the μυστήρια got their name.[25] The popular etymology of μυεῖν as deriving from μύειν ('to shut the eyes or lips') – thus invoking silence in the very origin of the term for initiation – may be genuine or may be fanciful.[26] In either case, it indicates a popular perception that initiation was intimately connected with silence.

There might be multiple grades of initiation, and 'greater' and 'lesser' mysteries, institutions which created further hierarchy within the cult itself: at Eleusis initiates became *mystai*, and, returning a year later for a second ceremony, were known as *epoptai*.[27] An essential precursor to initiation in the Eleusinian mysteries, which came to have an important interpretative life in Platonism, was purification (καθαρμός, κάθαρσις), a ritual act which set the aspiring initiand apart from his or her everyday life and from society as a whole.[28] The initiatory meaning of μυεῖν was also expressed by the more general verb τελεῖν (to complete, perfect, celebrate, initiate), and its cognates τελετή (rite), τελεστής (initiator), etc.[29] Mystic rituals were also known as ὄργια, 'secret rites'.

[22] Burkert 1987, 11.
[23] See n. 25.
[24] See Burkert 1987, 32; Martin 1995, 102–103.
[25] On the Latin term *initiare* see Graf 2003, 7–8, who analyses scholarly and popular interpretations of initiation; the most useful definition is that of a 'ritual change in status' (Young 1965; see Burkert 1987, 8).
[26] Burkert 1987, 8, n. 36; cf. Montiglio 2000, 25–27.
[27] See Clinton 2003.
[28] Burkert 1987, 94–98; 101–104.
[29] On this term, see Burkert 1987, 9, with n. 40. It need not refer to mysteries, but often does; the verb τελεῖν with a god's name in the dative means 'to initiate into the mysteries of that god'.

Some mysteries, including those of Eleusis, featured a cultic centre;[30] the τελεστήριον, access to which was prohibited to non-initiates when certain rites were underway,[31] was one of the more important images associated in later philosophic adaptations with the higher secrets of philosophy.[32] Mysteries generally had a central mythological narrative, often called the *hieros logos*, usually a story of the god or gods of the cult (a *theologia*).[33] This account, sometimes taking the form of a written document but sometimes of an oral teaching,[34] was surrounded by an aura of secrecy, but was not necessarily known only to a select group.[35]

As we have seen, it was forbidden to reveal the mysteries, a prohibition backed up by the threat of divine punishments and, in many cities, by serious legal sanctions;[36] to do so was most commonly expressed by the verb ἐκφέρειν (Lat. *enuntiare*).[37] But it is also unclear that there were 'secrets' to be revealed, in the sense of secret doctrines or teachings; more likely, a ritual enactment of some kind was the climactic revelation of the initiation process, along with the display of sacred objects.[38] This 'revelation' was known as ἐποπτεία, a term which came to be a shorthand for the highest stage of initiation at Eleusis, and then generally; the verb θεάομαι is also very prominent in this context, and the secret objects seen are often called θεάματα, while the initiand is the θεατής, terms which reoccur denoting the ineffable visionary 'objects' of intellection and the encounter with the One in later Platonism.[39]

A final piece of mystery-terminology with an important afterlife in Platonism and Pythagorean currents is the mystic *symbol* (σύμβολον). The

[30] There were many smaller 'private' religious groups from at least Classical times, which resembled clubs or associations; these may have met in private homes, and were not necessarily associated with a cultic centre, although they did share many characteristics with the mysteries, including secrecy and initiation practices (see Martin 1995). These *collegia*, however, did not influence the terminology or themes of mystic silence in the way that the more high-profile, iconic mysteries such as Eleusis did, with the exception of the widespread Bacchic or Dionysian mysteries, whose metaphorical adoption by Plato is discussed below.

[31] See Casel 1919, 17.

[32] The image of the sanctuary in Plotinus is discussed at p. 232. The discussions in *Entretiens Hardt* XXXVII are a good overview of the ancient Greek sanctuary generally.

[33] Burkert 1987, 70–88. See further p. 58.

[34] Burkert 1987, 70–71.

[35] See n. 21.

[36] See Casel 1919, 6–11; Scarpi 1987, 32–33.

[37] On this term see Casel 1919, 7; 9; 56; 64; 94 ff.; 114; 147; 157; Pépin 1984, 31–32 gives many examples of its use both in the mysteries and in Platonism and Christian writers.

[38] Mortley 1986, Vol. I, 113–115. This does not of course rule out genuine secret teachings, or knowledge in the form of passwords, etc., but it is clear that these were not universals in the mystery cults, while secrecy was. We might speculate that the term ἐκφέρειν had a literalistic origin in the idea of actually taking the sacred objects out of the sacred precinct, thus being analogous to *sacrilegia*.

[39] See Pépin 1984, 30, n. 56.

root meaning of this term referred to a kind of authenticating device composed of a broken item, say a piece of pottery; the possessors of the pieces, in fitting them together (whence the prefix συν-), could prove themselves to be the proper subjects of a contract, treaty or other undertaking by showing that they possessed the tokens of its original formation.[40] In the context of mystery-cult, the *symbolon* took on an extended meaning indicating some token of recognition – a password, formula, or saying – by which initiates might recognise one another (and, perhaps, be recognised by the gods).[41] More will be said below about 'symbols' in the context of Pythagoreanism, a tradition which seems to have adopted and transformed the mystic *symbolon*.

This terminology has been stressed because it functioned to signal to an ancient reader or listener that the well-known *topoi* of the mysteries were being invoked; after Plato's adaptation of mystery themes, these terms became especially important for the philosophic reader, whose appreciation of their meaning would be largely influenced by Plato's powerful adaptation of them.

Foremost among the themes invoked by the use of this terminology, as has already been discussed, was that of the notionally inviolable secret, the ἄρρητον or ἀπόρρητον, which took the form, in practice, of silence.[42] This silence is presented as literally inviolable in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*: Demeter teaches mysteries to mankind, 'awful mysteries which no one may in any way transgress or pry into or utter, for deep awe of the gods checks the voice'.[43] Silence constituted the act by which the social categories of initiate and profane were constructed and maintained. As a theme, the silence of the mysteries would be the single most important borrowing from traditional religion by philosophy. When other mystic terms and tropes such as initiation, purification, or revelation occur in philosophic texts, we should thus be aware that they served above all to call to the mind of the educated Classical reader a background context of inviolable silence. These terms were taken up by philosophy quite early on,[44] and came eventually to take on a secondary meaning of 'formally ineffable', though never losing the original implication of secrecy, an important point returned to below. The question of *when* this evolution in meaning occurred cannot be answered

[40] See Struck 2004, 78–84.

[41] See Burkert 1972, 175–176; Coulter 1976, 61; Brisson 1987, 93; Struck 2004, 100–102. The Masonic handshake is perhaps a modern parallel.

[42] See Casel 1919, 6; Montiglio 2000, 37–38.

[43] Ll. 478–9, trans. Evelyn-White 1936. See Collins 1999, 19.

[44] See Casel 1919, 6; Montiglio 2000, 37, n. 162 for early appearances of these terms; Xenophon (*HG* 6.3.6) seems to be the earliest quasi-philosophical appearance of ἄρρητος.

with precision, but Chapter 3 points to a likely development in Middle Platonism.

Elements of Philosophic Silence in Early Philosophy

Philosophy, almost as soon as it was first conceived and given a name, was defined in terms not only of the search for truth, but of privileged access to truth. As Jean Pépin and others have shown, philosophy was from its very beginnings a genre concerned with the privileging of knowledge, and various types of philosophic elitism were widespread from the earliest works of the philosophic tradition.[45] This section will sketch out the most important influences from early philosophy on the later Platonist culture of silence.

Presocratic Philosophic Silence

Certain elements of the culture of Platonist philosophic silence can be traced back to Presocratic philosophy. The early Italian philosophers Pythagoras, Parmenides and Empedocles, were engaged in an active transformation of initiatory and purificatory themes from the traditional mystery cults. Around the same time, the literary movement responsible for the 'Orphic' poems arose, in which there are also signs of a re-interpreting of mystery materials in a philosophic way. Considerations of space make it impossible to enter into the complex relations between the Orphic movements, Pythagoreanism, Empedocles and Parmenides, and of all of these to traditional cult; the evidence is fragmentary, and widely divergent interpretations are possible.[46] The briefest of summaries follows, confined strictly to the manifest uses of themes and terminology from the mysteries in the poems of 'Orpheus', Empedocles and Parmenides, as well as a note on the different concerns of concealment found in Heraclitus.

[45] Pépin 1984; cf. Brisson 1987. Also important in this connection are Casel 1919, 28–50; Szlezák 1977; Lamberton 1995; Stroumsa 1996a. Cf. Armstrong 1990a, 96–99, who emphasises the 'openness' of Hellenic philosophy as a genre, while positing 'philosophic diffidence' as an accepted behavioural norm. The concentration on secrecy and silence in the present discussion should not be seen as denying the explorations of free discourse by ancient philosophers, but rather as qualifying them in specific ways.

[46] Approaches to these philosophers from Classics have tended to emphasise their 'philosophic' content, and it is common to find an entire book on the Parmenidean fragments with only the slightest reference to mystery or ritual practice (e.g. Palmer 2009). At the other extreme, Kingsley (1995, 1999) has argued that philosophy must, in the case of Pythagoras and the Eleatics, be understood as essentially involving magical rituals and similar practices. The truth of the matter may lie somewhere between these two extremes; see e.g. West 1983, 7–15 and Burkert 1972, 125–133 on the connections which may be drawn between the movement that produced the Orphic texts and Pythagoreanism.

The *locus classicus* of early philosophic silence is of course that for which the Pythagoreans were, already in Plato's day, synonymous, and Pythagorean silence is treated in a separate section.

'Orphic' Secrecy

We know from the Derveni papyrus what had long been conjectured; that a movement existed as early as the fifth century BCE[47] engaged in esoteric textual exegesis on a corpus of hexameter works known as the Orphic poems.[48] The character of the movements known as 'Orphic' is obscure; a number of poems attributed to Orpheus were in circulation in antiquity,[49] and there is scattered but strong evidence of an Orphic 'movement' with links to mystery cult.[50] What can be said for certain is that the movements which used the name Orpheus were diverse.[51] In speaking of Orphism, this book refers specifically to the Orphic poems and the interpretative traditions based on them. Orphism, for our purposes, was a literary movement or, more likely, movements, and its salient characteristic was a transformation of traditional mystery culture in a new, literary context, and one which sometimes (as in the case of the Derveni document) also incorporated elements of the new philosophic movements.

The Orphic poems are not well preserved, but it is clear that they had formal connections with the mythical narratives associated with mystery traditions. As such, they were expressed in terms of secret knowledge, with the difference that they were circulated in a literary form that the mystery narrations mostly avoided, as far as we can tell. Our knowledge of the secrecy associated with these works is fleshed out by the works of later

[47] The Derveni papyrus dates from the latter part of the fourth century, but the commentary it contains is thought to be about a century older (West 1983, 75, 77; Lamberton 1995, 149). All references are to the edition of Kouremenos et al. 2006.

[48] See West 1983. On the importance of this interpretative tradition for Platonism, see Lamberton 1995, 149–150; Rappe 2000, 143.

[49] See all West 1983.

[50] Burkert 1982, 1–2; Rappe 2000, 148. We possess several items – the Olbia funerary plates, the Derveni papyrus (which was found half-incinerated in an ancient funeral pyre, probably indicating a ritual immolation as part of a funerary rite; see Kouremenos et al. 2006, 3–4) and an ancient graffito referring to *orphikoi* – which indicate that there was a community known as 'Orphics' and that they did practise special rites. References to ὀρφεοτελεσταί/οἱ τὰ ὀρφικὰ μυστήρια τελοῦντες, Orphic initiators, support connecting this movement with initiatory τελεταί more broadly (Burkert 1982, 4). Plato refers to itinerant ὀρφεοτελεσταί, and to 'books of Musaeus and Orpheus' (*R.* 364b–365a). It is difficult, however, to specify beyond these bare facts (see Burkert 1982 *passim*), and West (1983, 2) cautions that the *orphica* should be seen as remnants of a literature rather than as representing a 'movement' – the point being that the 'Orphics' were not a mystery-cult or religious movement in the normal sense.

[51] Linforth 1973 does the essential work of separating out the various cultural strands associated with the name of Orpheus in antiquity; see summary at Burkert 1982, 3–4.

writers, especially Platonist philosophers, but care must be used in interpreting this evidence, as these authors read 'Orpheus' as a theologian-poet of great antiquity and authority, and they had long since grown accustomed to associating the mysteries with the literary expression of philosophy.[52]

The partial destruction of the Derveni papyrus – not an Orphic poem but an allegorical interpretation of an Orphic poem – may indicate an actual concern with a ritualised secrecy. But the Nachleben of this mode in Platonism – the written work which calls for secrecy, or even for its own destruction – was something entirely different, a form of written silence rather than a secret mode of writing. We can no longer tell to what degree the initiatory language of the Orphic poems genuinely reflected a ritual context, or to what degree it might already have been a literary re-reading of the mysteries as philosophic or proto-philosophic wisdom; however, the importance of this tradition for the present discussion is its later use by Plato and Platonism, as a source for themes of mystic silence, which will become evident in what follows. We should note in passing, however, that the Derveni document show the early existence of a tradition of reading these poems as containing a subtext of philosophic meaning intentionally put there by Orpheus, their author;[53] the Late Platonist claims that Orpheus should be read as a theologic teacher in a philosophic style are thus not Platonist invention.

Parmenides

Parmenides was perhaps the most important Presocratic philosopher for Platonism. The proem of Parmenides' philosophic poem depicts the philosopher travelling to the underworld along a 'way' (ὁδός) called the 'way of the knowing man' (εἰδὼς φώς); the 'way', along with the title of the first main section of the poem, *The Way of Truth*, recalls inscriptions on an Orphic funerary lamella,[54] while the specific wording of the 'knowing man' recalls terminology familiar from the initiatory tradition.[55] The entire episode seems to be patterned on the mythical narrations common to both the mysteries and to the Orphic tradition, with Parmenides' initiatory journey doubling as his 'initiation' into philosophic wisdom, which is taught to him by a mysterious goddess. The goddess greets Parmenides:

[52] On Orpheus the theologian, see p. 96. On philosophic education and reading as mysteries, see p. 106 ff.
[53] *Pap. Derv.* 7.4-11; cf. 25.12–13. See Struck 2004, 29–39; Heath 2013, 117.
[54] See summary of evidence at Palmer 2009, 58; Feyerabend 1984.
[55] See Burkert 1969, 5; Palmer 2009, 57–58.

> Welcome, O youth, arriving at our dwelling as consort of immortal charioteers and mares which carry you; no ill fate sent you forth to travel on this way, which is far removed indeed from the step of men, but right and justice. You must be informed of everything, both of the unmoved heart of persuasive reality and of the beliefs of mortals, which comprise no genuine conviction.[56]

The most important point for the present discussion is the way in which Parmenides expresses the process of acquiring philosophic wisdom as an act of initiation at the hands of a goddess. The discussion will return to this framing of philosophic knowledge as initiatory knowledge.

Of note, too, is the absolute privileging of knowledge implied by this revelatory mode of exposition: a dichotomy drawn between the wrong beliefs of mortals about reality and the way things actually are (the goddess' divine revelation) runs through the surviving fragments as a kind of structural element.[57] We thus have here two major themes of philosophic silence: philosophy as mystery and mystic initiation as the acquisition of philosophical knowledge.

Empedocles

The work of Empedocles, who, like Parmenides, came to be seen as a forerunner or traditional authority by a majority of Platonists, has considerable bearing on Platonist philosophic silence. The poem or poems of Empedocles[58] survive only in fragments, but several of these invoke themes of mystic silence in a context where the philosophic doctrines of the author are themselves the secrets. We might speculate that Empedocles' work thus represents an early example of the philosophic published secret, expressed in the thematic register of the mysteries. Speculation aside, however, we do possess several solid indications that Empedocles' work, like that of Parmenides before him (and possibly influenced thereby)[59] invoked mystic secrecy.

We have two principal titles attributed to Empedocles, *On Nature* and *Purifications*. The latter title recalls the change of status undergone by the hopeful initiand at the beginning of the initiation process. Empedocles held that those who attained to wisdom were of a divine nature, and their

[56] B 1.24–30 DK, trans. Coxon 1986.
[57] Fr. 1, 29–30; fr. 2; fr. 6, 3 *ad fin.*; fr. 8, 50–2 DK.
[58] On the one-poem hypothesis, see Inwood 1992, 9–18; Trépanier 2004, 1 ff. Obbink 1993, 56–58 conveniently summarises the evidence.
[59] D.L. 8.2.55–6 cites ancient testimonies that Empedocles relied on Parmenides.

souls were freed from the cycle of incarnations,[60] an idea which may be an appropriation to philosophy of the traditional mystery cult theme of a special status for the initiated in the hereafter. His work thus shared the eschatological themes common in many mystery teachings.

It also invoked the *topos* of mystic silence, and in a unique way. An invocation of the Muse attributed to *On Nature* calls not only for divine inspiration for the philosopher's song, a request familiar from epic and lyric tradition, but for the goddess' aid in maintaining mystic secrecy:

> But turn from my tongue, O gods, the madness of these men, and from hallowed lips let a pure stream flow. And I entreat you, virgin Muse, white-armed, of long memory, send that which it is right and fitting for mortals to hear (ὧν θέμις ἐστὶν ἐφημερίοισιν ἀκούειν, / πέμπε), driving the well-reined chariot from the place of reverence.[61]

Empedocles' request for divine assistance, not only in composing his verses, but in concealing what ought to be concealed of the matters he wishes to discuss, is a notable use of the theme of mystic silence: the author prays that his work might be successful not only in communication, but in concealment.

Another fragment of Empedocles is preserved in a Platonist context which illustrates the way the earlier philosopher was read as a paragon of an esoteric mode of teaching in the later culture of Platonist philosophic silence. One of the characters in Plutarch's work of philosophic table-talk, the *Convivial Disputations,* is himself called Empedocles. Under discussion are various Pythagorean *symbola* (on which see page 60) and their esoteric meanings. Plutarch's Empedocles begins with a rhetorical flourish of respect for the secrecy surrounding the Pythagorean ἄρρητον, but assures his comrades that what he is about to recount is not a secret.[62] He then proceeds to discuss the avoidance of fish attributed to the Pythagoreans:

> Tyndares the Lacedæmonian said the reason for this was the honour which they accorded to keeping silence (ἐχεμυθίας), and they called fish 'ἔλλοπας', since their voice was 'shut up' (εἰλλομένην). And my namesake [Empedocles] counselled Pausanias after the Pythagorean manner concerning doctrines, to 'Cover them up within your silent breast' (στεγάσαι φρενὸς ἔλλοπος εἴσω).[63]

[60] Ap. Clem. Al. *Strom*. IV 13 ; V 14.
[61] B3 ll. 4–8 DK.
[62] 728d 4–6.
[63] Plut. *quaest. conv*. 728e 6–11, quoting Emped. fr. B5 DK.

Whatever the original context of this fragment in Empedocles, its adaptation by Plutarch into a 'Pythagorean' admonition of secrecy is clear here.

Heraclitus

Not all Presocratics were engaged with the mysteries in this constructive way; Heraclitus was sharply critical of traditional religious observances.[64] But Heraclitus was seen by many Platonists as a philosophic forerunner, or even an early member of their school of thought,[65] and is an important Presocratic source for two key Platonist ideas of esoteric interpretation. The first is the *locus classicus* for the idea of the *arcana naturæ*: Heraclitus' extremely influential observation that 'Nature loves to hide' influenced the ways in which the Platonists (and many other thinkers throughout history) conceived of esoteric discourse.[66]

Also important is the Heraclitean 'riddle' (αἴνιγμα). Heraclitus' riddling tendency is well-known, and the use of riddling language can be seen as a form of privileging of knowledge; Heraclitus expresses no great respect for the intelligence of the common man,[67] and his riddling style may have been, at least in part, a methodology of public secrecy aimed at protecting his doctrines from the misunderstanding they were certain to encounter if bruited about. In the case of riddles, knowledge is withheld from those unworthy or unable to receive it, not by literal silence, but by hiding in plain sight but out of reach, not unlike Porphyry's 'mystic' poem cited above. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the transformation of the riddle into a hermeneutic tool in Middle Platonist and Plotinian interpretation of traditional materials. Heraclitus' elitist stance was also probably absorbed into the culture of philosophic elitism which arose in Platonism, discussed below.

Pythagorean Silence

The Presocratic thinkers discussed above have been given the most summary of treatments, but Pythagoras and his school demand considerably more attention. They are the source *par excellence* for themes of silence and philosophic secrecy;[68] indeed, the Pythagoreans were synonymous

[64] E.g. fr. 14 DK.

[65] On Heraclitus in the tradition as envisaged by Plotinus, see p. 127.

[66] Fr. B123 DK. This statement had a very interesting Nachleben in later Platonism (see n. 123). On the *arcana naturæ* in ancient Greek thought, see Pépin 1984, 28–30; Stroumsa 1996a, 93; Hadot 2006.

[67] Frr. B.1, 17, 29, 34, 49, 56, 57, 108 and 121 DK, cited and discussed at Casel 1919, 35.

[68] On Pythagorean silence and secrecy generally, see Casel 1919, 29–35; Burkert 1972, 178 ff., 219 ff.; Brisson 1987, 88–101; Bremmer 1995, 63–70.

with the practice of silence from quite an early date.[69] We suffer from a dearth of solid, early evidence for the Pythagorean way of life,[70] but, whatever its historical relation to cultic practice, we find it associated with terminology from traditional mystery cults, and many of the themes of Pythagorean silence are structurally similar to those associated with mysteries.[71] It is a plausible conjecture, if not susceptible to proof, that Plato's later emphasis on the control of philosophical knowledge arose from his interest in, and connection with, Pythagorean circles in Italy and Sicily in his later life.[72] Testimony to Pythagoreanism from the Classical period mentions *arrêta*,[73] a term which still maintained its unambiguous meaning of 'secret' or 'for an initiated group' in the specific context of religious secrets.[74] We find the typical mystery themes of divine or human punishment for breaking the commandment of secrecy[75] in some accounts as well.[76] In the writings of Platonists and Neopythagorean thinkers this mystic secrecy is re-imagined as philosophic silence, sometimes based in philosophic elitism whereby certain doctrines are inappropriate for the ears of the many,[77] and sometimes based in the transcendent, ineffable

[69] Pythagorean silence is taken as proverbial by Isocrates (*Busiris* 29) and the comic poet Alexis (ap. Porph. *V.P.* 10). See Burkert 1972, 178–179. Aristotle, in a fragment transmitted by Iamblichus, states that the famous doctrine that there are three types of rational beings – gods, men and Pythagoras – was among their 'very secret' (τοῖς πανὺ ἀπορρήτοις) doctrines (Ar. fr. 192 Rose = Iamb *V.P.* 31). Aristoxenus, writing around the same time, also states that Pythagoras had esoteric doctrines (μὴ εἶναι πρὸς πάντας πάντα ῥητά: fr. 43 W = D.L. 8.1.15).

[70] On problems with the sources see Burkert 1972, 97–109; cf. Dillon and Hershbell 1991, 16. Philip 1966, esp. 140–147 argues that, in light of the lack of evidence, the idea of a Pythagorean community with a characteristic βίος should be dated to the late Hellenistic period.

[71] Burkert argues that the social practices of the early Pythagoreans did in fact have close parallels with the mysteries on many levels, and that ties with mystery cults should not be ruled out (1972, 155, 159, 178 ff.; cf. Bremmer 1995, 69). The famous Pythagorean prohibitions, such as that against eating beans, have many parallels in their early attestations, with similar or identical prohibitions current in mystery ritual contexts (*ibid.* 177–178). On the structural parallels between Pythagorean and mystic silence, see Montiglio 2000, 27–28.

[72] As argued by Morrison 1958.

[73] Arist. fr. 192 = Iam. *V.P.* 31; Aristox. fr. 43 W = D.L. 8.1.15: μὴ εἶναι πρὸς πάντας πάντα ῥητά. See Burkert 1972, 177–179.

[74] See p. 50.

[75] See n. 36.

[76] Burkert 1982, 18. The story of Hippasos of Metapontum, who was drowned by the gods for revealing Pythagorean secrets (namely the mathematical principle of incommensurability; see Fritz 1945), is a good example of the divine punishment theme played out in the history of philosophy (Iamb. *V.P.* 247; see Fritz 1945, 260; Burkert 1972, 207, 459; Brisson 1987, 92, n. 27). As for human punishment, we may cite the story of the Pythagorean Hipparchus, who clearly wrote out his master's secrets. He was expelled from the brotherhood, who then erected a symbolic tombstone for him (Clem. Al. *Strom.* V.9; cf. Iamb. *V.P.* 75–76: Hipparchus' revelation of the Pythagorean arcana 'equally unjust and impious' as the revelation of the Eleusinian mysteries).

[77] E.g. Ph. *Quod omnis prob. lib. sit* 2 ff.; Iamb. *V.P.* 71–72.

nature of the first principle, according to which secrecy and silence are simultaneously evoked.[78]

Pythagorean secrecy is regularly broken and made subject to philosophical revelation. Aristotle, of course, was concerned to state Pythagorean doctrines in the most straightforward way possible, and in at least one passage he reveals a doctrine that he specifically states to be *arrêton*;[79] this is typical of Aristotle's approach to the works of earlier thinkers, whose thought he values to the degree in which they foreshadow his own thought. But the proverbial Pythagorean silence is also broken by the Late Platonists, who saw Pythagoras as one of the greatest philosophic sages in history, if not the single greatest.[80] The trope of 'the secret revealed' is nowhere more apparent than in the Pythagorean works of Porphyry and Iamblichus, which reveal Pythagorean 'secrets' at every turn.[81] Again, we should be alert to the practice of written silence in these instances, and its concern with speech-acts of hiding and revealing, rather than seeking 'secrets' or being baffled by the Platonists' apparent lack of respect for Pythagorean esotericism.

Several themes of silence associated with the Pythagorean mystique are important to the Platonist culture of philosophical silence, and have specific relevance for Plotinus and the way he conceives the tradition to which he belongs and its means of transmission. The first is the long-standing association of Pythagoras with an esoteric oral teaching.[82] This theme of orality is especially interesting because, like the trope of Platonist orality discussed below, it was maintained and propagated precisely by a *written* body of work; there arose a huge literature of pseudo-pythagorean writings, among which the Pythagorean texts known as *hieroi logoi*, whose very name implies a secret unsuitable for the uninitiated, present a particularly striking example of public secrecy.

[78] We have the testimony of Plutarch (*Numa* 22, *Quaest. Conv.* 728 D 4–6 cited), Iamblichus (*V.P.* 252) and Nichomachus of Gerasa (ap. Porph. *V.P.* 57) on Pythagorean doctrines which are ἄρρητα. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, this term had come to incorporate a new meaning of 'ineffable' by the second century CE.

[79] Cited n. 69.

[80] Pythagoras' place in Platonist constructions of philosophic tradition is discussed p. 102 ff.

[81] Cf. Casel 1919, 53: *Tot vero locis de silentio Pythagoreorum garruli illi scriptores verba faciunt, ut paene nauseam moveant*.

[82] Pythagorean orality: Aristox. Fr. 43 W = D.L. 8.1.15; Dicæarchus Fr. 33 W = Porph. *V.P.* 19; Plut. *Alex.* 1.4/*Moralia* 328a; Iamb. *V.P.* 199. See Brisson 1987, 90–91. There are conflicting traditions as to whether Pythagoras wrote anything at all: Diogenes Laërtius thinks he did, but reports that there were those who denied it (8.1.6 ff; cf. 1.16). Plotinus refers to poetic writings of Pythagoras, which he considers obscure (see p. 130). Iamblichus attributes various texts to him, while maintaining that he had an esoteric oral teaching as well (*V.P.* 90, 146, 152).

We first find the term *hieros logos* in Herodotus and other early sources as an *arcanum* associated with private cult,[83] but it appears in the post-Hellenistic period as a pseudepigraphic genre of Neopythagorean writing,[84] and as such functions as a concrete example of the 'secret revealed' trope: writing a *hieros logos* for public consumption embodies a contradiction between the ostensible nature of secrecy – that of the occlusion of knowledge – and its rhetorical nature – that of revealing the existence of a secret.[85] The prevailing association of Pythagorean teaching with orality adds a further level of rhetorical secrecy, and a further logical contradiction, to the fact of these texts.

A second key Pythagorean theme for Platonist philosophic silence is the related idea of the hierarchical student body, with inner and outer circles of disciples.[86] As noted above, Pythagoras is said in many sources to have delivered his inner doctrines orally, and only to an initiated group of students; there is some confusion or disagreement in Classical sources as to which of the two groups of students, *acousmatics* and *mathematics*, were the inner and outer circles, but the former are perhaps more generally thought to be the initiated elite,[87] and their name may be seen as emphasising the orality of the secret teaching,[88] but, alternately, they were 'hearers' because they had not yet earned the right to speak, while the *mathematics* were the inner circle who engaged with the teachings in earnest.[89]

The account of an initiatory period of silence undergone by Pythagorean aspirants[90] is another very important theme developed in later ideas of philosophic esotericism. It furnishes the *locus classicus* for the idea of the literally silent philosopher: the Pythagorean novitiate is said to have involved a five-year period of silence, followed by admission to the deeper philosophic mysteries of the sect.[91] The Pythagoreans are more generally associated with a practice of philosophic taciturnity extending to

[83] Hdt. 2.61 ff: Herodotus mentions the *hieros logos* of Ephesus, and quite properly refuses to divulge it; cf. 5.83.3 ἄρρητοι ἱροργίαι; 6.135.2 ἄρρητα ἱρά. See Heinrichs 2003, 236–237; 239 n. 113; Burkert 1972, 179 n. 97; 219–220.

[84] See n. 66; Thesleff 1965, 163–168; O'Meara 1989, 20, with n. 43.

[85] Cf. Burkert 1972, 219: '. . . a book with such a title is *a priori* apocryphal'.

[86] Burkert 1972, 192–208 surveys the complex strands of tradition, in which hierarchy among the students seems to be the sole universally held point.

[87] Cf. Casel 1919, 32.

[88] Brisson 1987, 91; Martin 1995, 111; but see Burkert 1972, 193.

[89] As in Aristotle's lost *On the Pythagoreans*; Clem. Al. *Strom*. V.59.

[90] E.g. Lucianus *Vit. Auct.* ll. 41–42; Iamb. *V.P.* 68, 72, 94 andc; D.L. 8.1.10. See Casel 1919, 32; Martin 1995, 111.

[91] See Casel 1919, 54–57 for a list of ancient sources for the Pythagorean silent novitiate.

their doctrines as a whole; Iamblichus seems to indicate that the term 'taciturnity' (ἐχεμυθία) is a piece of specifically Pythagorean jargon.[92]

The division of Pythagorean students into inner and outer members, in parallel with the well-known trope of greater and lesser mysteries, is an important theme for Platonist conceptions of philosophic education, and will be further explored below. In the image of the hierarchical philosophic community, whose probationary members observe literal silence, we have a trope which would be echoed in the later development of Platonist philosophic silence. In the tradition in Platonist biographical writing from late antiquity, exemplified by Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, Marinus' *Life of Proclus*[93] and Damascius' *Life of Isidore*,[94] we see a concern with establishing a hierarchy among the students of the philosopher in question which I think owes something to the graded Pythagorean student body.

The Pythagorean 'symbol' (σύμβολον) should also be mentioned here, although it is more fully discussed in the following chapter. In the mysteries, as we have seen, *symbola* were 'passwords' granted to initiands as signs of their special status; the term is also found in Orphic literature and in the early Pythagorean milieu with roughly this meaning, transposed from its mystery context to the 'mysteries' of Orphic and Pythagorean thought.[95] What began as 'words of power' in a sense familiar to students of religion and magic, however, were reinterpreted by later thinkers: the Pythagorean *symbolon* becomes, in Platonist interpretation, a form of discourse which takes the outward form of a gnomic statement, cultic prohibition, or 'proto-scientific' teaching, but which hides, in compressed and esoteric form, an inner philosophic meaning, such as the Pythagorean prohibition of eating fish noted above.[96]

Nineteenth-century scholarship tended to read such an esoteric discourse back into the earlier phases of Pythagorean culture,[97] but it now seems that this is a later hermeneutic strategy applied to early Pythagorean materials, by which they were read esoterically as containing hidden wisdom, often of a Platonist type, an interpretative evolution in which we

[92] Iamb. V.P. 94; cf. 32, 68, 188, 194 for other examples of ἐχεμυθία.
[93] Edwards 2000, 58–115 provides an English translation with useful notes.
[94] Athanassiadi 1999 provides an edition and translation.
[95] Orphic tradition: Fr. B.23 DK. Pythagoreans: Aristoxenus Fr. 43 W = D.L. 8.1.15. For a list of testimonia, see DK I 462–466.
[96] Plut. *quaest. conv.* VIII 7.1–4 features more Pythagorean *symbola*; cf. D.L. 8.1.17–18. See especially Brisson 1987, 93. Casel 1919, 53–66 cites numerous late antique sources for the Pythagorean 'symbol'.
[97] E.g. Casel 1919, 33–34; 59, following Hölk 1894.

can see the origin of the modern concept of 'symbolism'.[98] To take one example, Plotinus finds his doctrine of the One's ineffability, consequent on its radical simplicity, hidden in the Pythagorean figure of Apollo, whose name, etymologised as *alpha privativus* + *pollôn,* was used by the Pythagoreans to indicate esoterically (συμβολικῶς πρὸς ἀλλήλους) the One's total lack of multiplicity.[99] Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans thus provide, for Plotinus, a locus for situating an esoteric hermeneutic method, which is 'symbolic'.

Philosophic Silence in Classical Athenian Philosophy

New concerns of concealment arose in Plato and the generations following him; particularly striking is the culture of philosophic elitism which began to crystallise in this period. Plato's complex engagement with ideas of privileged knowledge is well known. It is also well known that Aristotle had 'esoteric' and 'exoteric' writings, the former for a controlled circulation and the latter intended for open distribution.[100] Indeed, the term ἐξοτερικός, which naturally implies the later-attested ἐσοτερικός, first appears in the context of this hierarchical Aristotelean corpus.[101] From a slightly later period, Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeceus* explains his ideas about the gods, which, he emphasises, differ greatly from those of the common man.[102] The opinion that the lover of truth was superior to the common mass of men is a basic premise upon which more developed theories of philosophical elitism were built. As we shall see, Plato played a key role in promulgating the idea of philosophic superiority, and also of the concomitant need to maintain at least discretion, if not outright secrecy, when discussing the higher realms of truth.

Aristophanes' satirical portrait in the *Clouds* gives us an informative glimpse into popular perceptions of philosophic practice in the Athens of Plato's time: Aristophanes' Socrates spends his days investigating the

[98] Struck 2004 is a detailed genealogy of the term *symbolon* from its earliest attested uses to its transformation into a term of esoteric hermeneutics in Platonism and beyond. Struck suggests that it was precisely in the Pythagorean *symbolon*, which began, indeed, as a 'password' akin to those current in the mysteries, but sometimes had a certain riddling quality, that the association was made between *symbolon* and enigma (*ibid*. 102). Enigma and *symbolon* appear in the following chapters as Platonist hermeneutic terms for esoteric reading.

[99] V.5[32]6.27–28, cited *in extenso* p. 212.

[100] See Ross 1948, II, 408–410; Poster 1997. Plutarch's treatment of this Aristotelean esotericism is discussed on p. 77.

[101] The term ἐξοτερικός occurs eight times in the Aristotelean corpus (cited at Boas 1953, 78–80); ἐσοτερικός is first attested in Galen (*ibid*. 78).

[102] D.L. 10.123–124.

things beneath the earth and in the heavens in a φροντιστήριον, a 'place of deep thinking'. Initiation to the φροντιστήριον is for sale, and its teachings enable one to speak the language of con-men and hair-splitting pedants.[103]

An early scene in the play addresses all the main issues of what would become the *topos* of philosophic silence. Answering the door to the φροντιστήριον, one of its students states that it maintains a strict policy of secrecy regarding its researches, and that no outsiders may learn what goes on within its walls.[104] The student then proceeds immediately to break this rule with a flourish of rhetorical secrecy, saying, 'I will tell you, but you must regard these things as mysteries', and enumerates several absurd researches carried out by Socrates.[105] This satire must reflect a perception of preciousness on the part of philosophers when it came to guarding their wisdom, as well as a certain scepticism regarding the value of what they professed to hide. Note that Aristophanes is mocking precisely the act of publically announcing a concealment without actually concealing anything. We will never know what his reaction might have been to the more extreme manifestations of this activity which developed in late antique Platonism.

Ideas of Privileged Knowledge in Classical Philosophy

These considerations of secrecy in Classical Athenian philosophy should not imply that it abounded in secret doctrines, but rather that philosophers were concerned not only with investigating truth, but in controlling access to it, and in *being seen* to control access to it.[106] The concern is one of elitism, not one of secrecy in the basic sense of the term, but in the sociological sense outlined in Chapter 1, as an act of exclusion leading to the acquisition of social capital.

But this is not to say that the philosophers themselves saw their elitist discourse in this way. The preponderant evidence suggests that early

[103] Ll. 260–261. Cf. ll. 316–318; 437–456.

[104] L. 140.

[105] L. 143. The entire episode takes place at ll. 133–220.

[106] Boas 1953 is concerned to refute the claim that secret philosophical doctrines existed at this early period, and his arguments generally make sense; however, he is deaf to the more subtle forms which privileging of knowledge, as a social force, takes. In discussion of passages in Diogenes Laertius where Plato (3.63) and Epicurus (10.5) are said to support the publication of esoteric works with hidden meanings, Boas remarks: 'Why anyone should take pleasure in the publication of his secrets is unexplained, as is the paradox of the secrets' being published' (88). The explanation lies in the power of secrecy as an act.

philosophic secrecy was mainly conceived of in one of two ways. The first main trope of secrecy in the Classical period, often expressed in the sources as silence, is most associated with the Pythagorean brotherhoods and the Presocratic poetic philosophers discussed above: this is the silence of the mysteries, which expressed an initiated/uninitiated dichotomy, transposed onto philosophy. This mystic silence was also adopted and transformed by Plato and his successors, a conceptual and thematic evolution discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

But a different kind of philosophic reserve is propounded by Plato, Aristotle and later philosophers, most often conceived of as necessary because of the need to keep certain truths out of the hands of those who might misunderstand or abuse them, a concern we perhaps see already in Heraclitus. In this case, we have evidence for two subsidiary conceptions. The first is the pædagogical concern that the reception of a philosophic truth by a student whose education had not attained the proper level of ripeness could actually interfere with his education or give rise to false ideas and misunderstandings; the Aristotelean exoteric and esoteric corpora seem to have been organised along these lines.[107] The second is the more urgent concern that 'the masses' would meet true philosophic doctrines with mockery or even violence.

Both of these issues are present in certain Platonic passages, discussed below. The so-called Tübingen school of Platonic interpretation has attempted to attribute a coherent pædogogic policy to Plato based on these materials, whereby his esoteric writing was pursued due to his belief that philosophic students must progress toward higher truths in a step-by-step manner.[108] The present inquiry is interested in the later reception of these Platonic materials rather than in Plato's 'programme', and makes no claims regarding the modern 'Esotericist debate', but there can be no doubt that the Platonic passages singled out by the Tübingen school as evidence for a Platonic educational programme served as loci for themes of philosophic silence in antique Platonism. It is also beyond doubt that they were put to use by later Platonism to construct a theory of Platonic pedagogy quite similar to that constructed by the Tübingen scholars, although with important differences.[109]

[107] Plut. *Alex.* 7.5, 668ab, discussed p. 77; Gel. 20.5.1-6. See Poster 1997. Aristotle himself alludes to his rationale for adopting a graded approach to pedagogy at *Met.* 1005b4; *Eth. Nic.* 1095a ff. This motif of privileged knowledge is especially important in Plato, as discussed in the following section.

[108] On the Esoteric readings of the *Tübingenschule*, see Appendix D, p. 266 ff. The Platonic passages in question are surveyed on pages 43–48.

[109] See p. 269.

The possibility that Classical philosophers might have been circumspect in their teaching out of concerns for their personal safety seems to make sense: the fate of Socrates was a clear warning that teachers of strange notions, especially notions about the gods, who deviated too far from certain cultural norms could meet with a drastic reaction.[110] However, our evidence for philosophic silence pursued for reasons of safety in the Classical period dates for the most part from the first centuries CE, and may have been read back into Classical antiquity by later authors.[111] The idea of secrecy or silence in the interests of safety plays a relatively minor role in Platonist thought; it becomes relevant in the later centuries of the late antique period, when philosophers such as Proclus were actually under constraints as to how openly they could teach their pagan doctrines for fear of Christian persecution;[112] but this period falls outside the scope of this book.

Philosophic Silence in Plato

As discussed on page 28, the baffling, playful Platonic corpus has provided fertile ground for theorists of philosophic secrecy down the centuries until the present day. The modern debate over 'Platonic Esotericism' has filled volumes.[113] Plato's uses of the rhetorics of secrecy and silence are essential for the development of the culture of philosophic silence in Platonism, but a detailed treatment of them would demand an entire chapter, if not a whole monograph. For reasons of space, I have compromised by summarising the main themes of secrecy and silence as they appear in Plato, with a view to indicating their importance for Platonism and Plotinus, while referring the reader to the extensive literature on Plato's 'esotericism' and related subjects.

[110] Cf. Heath 2013, 118.

[111] See p. 74. van Nuffelen 2011, 74 n. 5 collects references to Plato's having hidden the truth specifically out of fear of persecution, none of which date earlier than the second century CE, with the exception of a comment in Josephus (1st cen. CE) that Plato hid his true doctrine for fear of persecution by the mob (*Ap.* 2. 224–225). Plato's Protagoras claims that ancient poets were in reality sophists, but hid their true doctrines for fear of arousing hostility (*Prt.* 316d–e), which may have been a *locus classicus* for the idea, or perhaps even have reflected genuine concerns on Plato's part; this, however, is speculation. In the Cave passage in the *Republic* (514a–521b), Socrates describes how the denizens of the cave ridicule those who claim to have seen the true light of the sun. The passage ends with the statement that the unknowing cave dwellers will kill those who have seen the truth; this seems to be a reference by Plato to Socrates' fate, but, again, we cannot know this.

[112] See Lamberton 1995, 146.

[113] See Appendix D, p. 266 ff.

The key themes of privileged knowledge in Plato can be summarised as: philosophic elitism, the (notional) privileging of oral teaching over written philosophic works, the idea of an 'unwritten doctrine' and the equation of philosophy with the mysteries. It should again be emphasised that the ongoing debates over Plato's intentions vis à vis esotericism fall outside the concerns of this book; the Platonic materials under discussion are important here not in terms of Plato's intentions, but of the use to which they were put by his interpreters. This being the case, little account is taken of dialogic context in what follows, since the Late Platonists themselves took little account of the dialogue form as it is understood today.

Philosophic Elitism in Plato

There are many Platonic passages, beginning from the middle dialogues,[114] which posit an intensive, step-by-step training as a prerequisite for the philosophic life. The *Republic* outlines a course of training requiring decades of the most serious concentration and devotion, and other dialogues emphasise the need for the fullest engagement in philosophic practice.[115] Plato depicts philosophy as a way of life that sets the philosopher apart from the mass of mankind through an intensive education. An influential passage in the *Laws* (XII 968c-e) states that certain matters are not secret (ἀπόρρητα), but are only to be approached once the pupil has reached the proper philosophic development and not before (ἀπρόρρητα); passages from the *Republic* (498a, 521c ff., 539b) make similar points. It was impossible that the many should be philosophic.[116] Here is the serious side of the φροντιστήριον satirised by Aristophanes.

Plato's idea of philosophers as an elite group, set apart from the mainstream of humanity, set the tone for Platonism. Platonist ethics would always be those of a minority that believes it must remain a minority; we find no attempts to encourage the masses to embrace Platonist truth.[117]

[114] On the dating of the dialogues I follow Kahn 2002.

[115] *R.* VII.536b–540c, 539a-d. Cf. P*rm*. 136d–e. *Ep. II*. 314a5–7, 313c–d and *Ep. VII* 342a ff. are discussed below.

[116] Pl. *R.* 494a: φιλόσοφον … πλῆθος ἀδύνατον εἶναι. Cf. *Ep. VII* 343e–344a, *Ep. II* 314a1–5.

[117] Certain Platonists over the centuries toyed with the idea of reforming politics along Platonic lines; see above all O'Meara 2003. Porphyry tells us that Plotinus was nearly able to put into practice the foundation of a city to be run 'according to the laws of Plato' (*Plot.* 12; on this incident, see bibliography at Brisson et al. 1982, 121–122); one wonders where he would have found volunteers for the lower castes of his city, whom the philosophic elite, presumably himself and his associates, would direct. The political-religious-philosophical programme outlined by George Gemistos Plethon in the fifteenth-century Orthodox Roman context is a stunningly ambitious return to this dream of a Platonic polity, set in the late medieval world; it also calls for a strict caste system based on philosophic virtues and education. See Alexandre's edition of Plethon's *Book of Laws* (1982).

Platonist polemics against Christianity emphasise the populist elements of the latter; one of the many problems with this new religion was that it preached salvation for even the most uncultivated, unphilosophic riff-raff, putting them on an equal footing with the Hellenic philosopher without any need for the hard work of discovering the truth.[118] When we study Platonist self-understanding as an elite group in late antiquity, we should look to these crucial passages in Plato as key ideological starting-points, and they doubtless also influenced the transformation of 'philosopher' into a recognised quasi-professional role in late antiquity, and even the rise of pagan 'holy men' which we see in late antique biographies, where philosophic achievement and virtues give special spiritual powers to the philosophic adept.

Philosophic elitism is the best rubric under which to discuss Plato's more problematic references to privileged knowledge. Three passages are especially important in this regard; while scholarship may never agree on what Plato means in these passages, they clearly refer to tropes of secrecy or privileged knowledge which go beyond simple elitism, and enter into the rhetorical territory of philosophic silence.

The first is a passage in the *Theætetus* (152c), where Socrates chidingly suggests that the sophist Protagoras might have secret doctrines, expressed through enigmas and so hidden from the masses (by which he here means himself and his friends). This is striking as an overt reference to esoteric philosophical doctrines in the dialogues, in the full sense of the term outlined on page 22.[119] To most modern readers, its playful tone militates against interpreting it as indicating that Plato himself used enigmas to hide his true doctrines, but this was precisely how Platonists read Plato.[120] It may be that, here and elsewhere, Socrates' irony came to be read as signalling a hidden subtext.

Secondly, the 'philosophic digression' of the Seventh Platonic Epistle contains a key passage for later philosophic silence; it may not have been known in its entirety to the Middle Platonists, but it provides a very important model for Plotinus and his successors.[121] In the course of attacking

[118] Plotinus' critique of the Gnostics reflects this very concern; see p. 82 ff.

[119] A passage from the *Lysis* makes a similar statement: it is discussed on p. 115.

[120] See p. 137 ff.

[121] Out of an enormous literature on the authenticity or otherwise of the Seventh Epistle, the list of important arguments for and against at Gaiser 1980, n. 50 may serve as a representative selection. The epistle's authenticity does not seem to have been called into doubt by any antique Platonist, so this debate is not relevant to the present discussion. However, the issue is complicated by the fact that the 'philosophic digression' may have been inserted by a later hand. Tarrant (1983) has argued, significantly for Chapter 4 of this book, that the 'philosophical digression' of the Seventh Epistle

writings then in circulation on certain unnamed matters of high philosophic import, Plato says that he has never written on this subject, nor will he ever do so.

> For it is not at all speakable (ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς) like other subjects of study, but from much working together on the matter itself and living in company, suddenly a light, as it were leaping from fire, kindles in the soul, and (thenceforth) grows on its own.[122]

Three aspects of this passage are important in terms of philosophic silence. Firstly, the passage can be considered alongside the more down-to-earth descriptions of philosophic education mentioned above, as a further segregation of the philosopher from the mass of men on the basis of a special access to knowledge.

Secondly, it introduces the idea that the highest knowledge of philosophy *cannot be put into words*. We may doubt that Plato (or 'Plato') means to describe an ineffable form of knowledge or experience here, but it is clear that this is how he was read by Plotinus.[123] This passage is a Platonic *locus classicus* for the idea of a knowledge that is by definition incommunicable, an idea of the utmost importance for Plotinus and his successors, who found just such a knowledge in the encounter with the ineffable first principle.[124]

Thirdly, since Plato says that he has not written and will not write anything concerning these elevated matters, this passage would seem to mean that Plato's dialogues would not be a suitable place in which to search for truths about the higher matters of philosophy. It is however quite common in esoteric hermeneutics, both religious and philosophic, to read a denial as an esoteric affirmation; as we will see, this statement of Plato's could be read not only as an indication that the highest truths were ineffable, but also, *and simultaneously*, as an indication that the truth was to be sought hidden within the dialogues.

A third key passage for Platonist understanding of philosophic exclusion is found in the Second Epistle, which seems to be a forgery patterned on

does not appear in the Middle Platonists, indicating, albeit through an *argumentum e silentio*, that they did not have it in their editions of Plato; this means that they lacked one of the most striking Platonic passages for the esoteric nature of philosophic knowledge. Plotinus clearly did possess this passage, however, as he quotes it repeatedly (at VI.9[9]4.11-12; V.3[49]17.29; II.6[1]1.43–44).

[122] 341c4–d1.

[123] E.g. VI.9[9]4.11–12; V.3[49]17.29; II.6[1]1.43–44.

[124] The encounter with the One cannot accurately be described as 'knowledge', but it occupies the highest point on a scale of types of knowledge, and so may be referred to as such for convenience; these questions of terminology are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

the Seventh,[125] and contains similar themes of secrecy, but expands them in ways that the Seventh Epistle does not, resulting in *loci classici* for two themes of secrecy unique in the Platonic corpus.[126] Like the Seventh Epistle, it describes a long process of philosophic training, which again results in a sublime final result – in this case compared to the refining of gold rather than to illumination (314a5–7) – and states that the author will never write a treatise on the mysterious 'nature of the first [principle]' (314c1–4; τοῦ πρώτου φύσεως: 312d7), since the information, if written down, could fall into the wrong hands (314b7–c1). So far we are in territory familiar from the Seventh Epistle.

But the author states that he *will* reveal his doctrine in the form of an enigma (312d7–8), and the well-known, cryptic passage describing the 'King of All' and two subsidiary entities follows (312d7–313a6). Here the Platonic voice is actively attributing to itself the use of 'enigma', a mode of expression discussed in detail in the following chapter, attributed in the dialogues only to other philosophers, or to mysterious 'ancients'. This is, indeed, the only passage in the Platonic corpus where the authorial voice unmistakably says: 'Here is the truth of the matter, which, however, I am hiding because it is a secret doctrine.' I refer to this basic proposition as the theme of 'the secret hidden in plain sight'. It sheds light on the incident of Porphyry's esoteric poem, and its importance will appear again and again in the discussions of hiding and revealing which follow.

The second key passage, appearing at the end of the Epistle, is deceptively simple. Having bid his correspondent farewell, 'Plato' commands him to reread the Epistle multiple times and then to burn it (314c4–6). The paradoxes for written philosophy here are manifest: if the letter should have been burnt, the Platonists have no business reading it, though read it they do. If such matters should not be written about except under the strictest secrecy, then the Platonists have no business publishing their texts. This passage is the Platonic *locus classicus* of the text which calls for its own destruction, a theme I refer to as 'the call to destroy the text', a subtype of the widespread theme of 'the secret revealed'. This theme should be understood as informing not only the occasional rhetorical flourish in Platonism

[125] In contrast to the Seventh Platonic Epistle, hardly any scholars argue for the authenticity of the Second. Bluck 1960 reviews the main lines of argument against the authenticity of the Second Epistle, discounting many, but still concluding that the epistle is a forgery. Rist 1965a argues for Neopythagorean influence on the Second Epistle. Again, the issue for Platonism is not the authenticity of the Epistle, but the use to which it was put by Platonists, who seemingly did not doubt its Platonic authorship.

[126] See discussion at Lamberton 1995, 141.

to the effect that 'it would be better not to write this' (always of course followed by the writing in question), but also the negative discourse of Late Platonism, which describes the ineffable first principle, only immediately to deny its describability.

The passage concerning the 'King of All' was a favourite of Plotinus', who cites it many times, taking it to be a reference to the One beyond being and two lower hypostases of intellect and soul.[127] But he makes no effort to hide the doctrine which 'Plato' had taken such pains to conceal; indeed, he is concerned to explain it. Proclus in the fifth century would explain this riddle step by step in great detail, again taking it to be a reference to ontological realities.[128]

Understood thematically, the adjuration to destroy the text may be seen as part of a larger category of written discourse turned against itself, and at the most basic levels. The overarching paradox is that of writing about why one should not write: this structural paradox would reappear, writ large, in Late Platonist apophatic texts, where ineffability takes the place of secrecy as the reason the text turns against itself.

Privileged Orality and the Unwritten Doctrines of Plato

Related to the theme of privileged knowledge in Plato is the valorisation of oral teaching and, in some passages, disparagement of the written word. The second and seventh Platonic epistles, and several dialogues from the middle period onward, notably the *Phædrus*, express the idea that the written word is an inferior medium for transmitting philosophical truth. Reasons given include the fact that, once published, the written word is out of the writer's control and open to misuse or misconstrual by the unphilosophic 'many',[129] and that the essential process of dialectical reasoning which constitutes the elite philosophic education can only be experienced through actual, face to face disputations.[130] We also have the passage cited from the Seventh Epistle, which states simply that certain matters of philosophy are 'not speakable', which, in its context, can be read as indicating that written form, for whatever reason, is unsuitable for expressing these matters.

These passages, if taken literally and understood, as the Platonists seem to have understood them, as representing aspects of a single viewpoint on

[127] Cited thirteen times by Plotinus: see *index fontium*, H + S2.
[128] *Theol. Plat.* II.8–9.
[129] *Ep. II* 314b7–c1.
[130] *Phdr.* 276a–277a, *Lg.* XII 968c-e, to which may be adduced the passages cited n. 115 on the direct teacher–student relationship and its importance for Platonic education.

Plato's part, present a problem that recurs throughout the history of Platonism. Plato of course wrote an immense number of philosophical works; in this the Platonists followed him. The obvious question is: *Why* did he and they do so? Scholarship has given various answers to this question in Plato's case, but judging an author's intentions is always a perilous undertaking, and I prefer to address the question from the point of view of textual performativity.

It is interesting to consider the problem of the unwritten doctrines of Plato in this context. We have good evidence that Plato had certain teachings which were ἄγραφα, 'unwritten', a term found in Aristotle which probably simply means 'not discussed in the dialogues'.[131] This need not mean that they were 'unwritable' – i.e. either secret or ineffable – but due to the nature of the Greek alpha privative adjective, ἄγραφα could naturally be construed as 'unwritable' as well as 'unwritten',[132] and probably was understood in this way by later Platonists.

Through the testimony of Aristoxenus, the question of the unwritten doctrines has become inseparable from the question of the Platonic lecture 'On the Good'.[133] This lecture, Aristoxenus tells us, was recounted by his teacher Aristotle, who used to describe the audience's bafflement when, expecting to hear something pertaining to normal human goods (wealth, health, strength, etc.), they were instead regaled with 'mathematics, numbers, geometry, astronomy and, finally, that the good is one' (φανείησαν οἱ λόγοι περὶ μαθημάτων καὶ ἀριθμῶν καὶ γεωμετρίας καὶ ἀστρολογίας καὶ τὸ πέρας ὅτι ἀγαθόν ἐστιν ἕν).[134]

The anomalous fact that this lecture, which was closely associated in antiquity with the idea of the unwritten doctrines, should have been a public affair, rather than an orally delivered initiatory teaching, is very difficult

[131] Ar. *Phys.* 209b14–15 refers to 'so-called unwritten doctrines' of Plato (τοῖς λεγομένοις ἀγράφοις δόγμασιν); *Metaph.* A6 (987b20–29) does not refer to unwritten doctrines as such, but discusses the indefinite dyad and other matters not present in the dialogues; Aristox. *Harm. Elem.* 39–40. Krämer 1959, 641 assembles an extensive list of ancient sources referring to the ἄγραφα δόγματα, many of which, however, are late antique reports of earlier works that do not survive, which complicates the evidence (cf. Vlastos 1981, 380 ff.). The interpretation of what is meant by ἄγραφα δόγματα is a contentious issue, upon which hangs much of the Esotericist/anti-Esotericist debate (see Appendix D).

[132] See n. 34.

[133] For a basic biography on the topic of 'On the Good' see Gaiser 1980, 35–37. For a summary of major interpretative issues, see Vlastos 1981, 379–398; see further the essays collected in *Méthexis* 1993 (Vol. 6). The basic testimony for the lecture 'On the Good' comes from Aristotle, particularly from the fragments of Περὶ τἀγαθοῦ , and, notably, from Aristoxenus (*Harm.* 39–40). See Vlastos 1963, 640 ff. for discussion of the complicated further primary evidence.

[134] Aristox. *Harm.* 39 ll. 8–15 On the Plato's statement that the Good is 'one' in his oral teachings, cf. Arist. *Metaph.* 1091b13–15, and see further pg. 179.

to explain for anyone seeking to construct a consistent rationale of esotericism out of the Platonic evidence. Fascinatingly, however, this fact seems not to have bothered the Platonists, for whom the lecture, and the unwritten doctrines as a whole, became loci of rhetorical silence: Alcinoüs testifies that Plato 'certainly only imparted his views on the good to a very small, select group of associates',[135] in total contradiction to the historical facts as Aristoxenus gives them. Likewise, the ἄγραφα δόγματα would become 'secret doctrines', although the very fact that Platonists knew them and were able to include them in their philosophical speculations indicates that they were nothing of the sort: they were, in fact, widely reported in a number of literary sources, including Aristotle. This story of the transmission of 'secrets' is an illustrative example of the way in which 'secret knowledge' becomes secret by virtue of its having been labelled as secret, and surrounded with the aura of secrecy; actual concealment may be involved, but it is equally possible for such knowledge to be bruited about for anyone to see or read.

Perhaps too much effort has been spent attempting to figure out a consistent rationale for Plato's public lecture on the good which, as the passages cited above suggest, would be better suited for a carefully vetted and prepared audience. It is a thankless task. However, the *idea* of a secret oral doctrine, and of the lecture *On the Good*, enveloped as they became in later interpretation by rhetorics of hiding and revealing, is of the utmost importance in the history of ideas. It is a curious hermeneutic fact that neither the datum of Plato's unwritten doctrines, nor the acceptance of his statements that he did not write down his true doctrines on certain matters, prevents either the ancient Platonists or the modern Tübingen 'Esoterics' from finding these very doctrines *hidden in the dialogues*. In other words, Plato's statements in the Seventh and Second Epistles – that certain matters of his philosophy are not present in his written works – are read, not as programmatic statements that mean what they say, but as coded indications that these doctrines had to be sought beneath the surface of the dialogues. Similarly, the well reported public lecture *On the Good*, which was open to the public and which transmitted identifiable doctrines, such as the 'indefinite dyad' and the oneness of the Good, remains a locus of notional secrecy in Platonism, in a manner perhaps comparable to the theme of secrecy associated with the mysteries, but with even less historical evidence for a doctrinal secret at the heart of the matter.

[135] *Did.* 27.179.37–9, trans. Dillon.

What the interpretative history of the lecture and the idea of the unwritten doctrines contributed to Platonism was an image of Plato busily writing, while keeping his true, deepest doctrines in reserve for oral instruction. This image may be thought to have influenced Plotinus in the affair of the secrets of Ammonius related by Porphyry, cited on page 41; Porphyry depicts Plotinus as fully prepared to transmit Ammonius' doctrines orally to selected students, while avoiding writing them down, a close thematic parallel to this idealised Platonic practice. Alternately, it may be that these Platonic tropes influenced Porphyry's account, depicting Plotinus in accordance with Classical models of philosophic silence.

The Mysteries and the 'Ancient Account' in Plato

Lastly, Plato makes extended use of imagery, language and themes drawn from the mysteries and the Orphic poems (which, we recall, were themselves adaptations or evolutions of mystery culture). The uses put to the mysteries by Plato are manifold, and include some of the most beautiful and influential passages in the dialogues. Here, particularly, reasons of space make it impossible to do the subject justice, but the key relevant points regarding philosophic silence can be made.[136]

The first is that Plato is inclined to attribute doctrines mystic, Orphic, Pythagorean and otherwise to unnamed 'ancient' sources.[137] Often taking the form of myths, these references to ancient wisdom set a precedent followed by many Platonists of complementing their arguments and proofs with authoritative statements from unnamed sages of the past. It is not always possible to identify the sources for Plato's accounts of ancient wisdom, but they often demonstrably refer to the mysteries, and are sometimes read as explications of doctrines expressed esoterically; that is, Plato will find a philosophic doctrine in an 'ancient account', be it a transformed Orphic cosmology or a mystic institution, but hidden within that account or institution by means of an enigma or other form of secrecy.[138] Plato's statement that oracles were delivered in enigmas which were interpreted

[136] A considerable amount of research has gone into the use Plato makes of these materials. See all Riedweg 1987, 2–69; also Casel 1919, 35–40; Burkert 1983, 250 ff.; Kingsley 1995, 74–148.

[137] E.g. *Ep. VII* 335a2: τοῖς παλαιοῖς καὶ ἱεροῖς λόγοις; *Phd.* 69c3–10, cf. 63c6, 67c5–6, 70c5–6; *Phdr.* 274c1 ff.; *Crat.* 402b-c; *Phlb.* 66c8-9; *Smp.* 195b5; *Lg.* 715e; and see following note.

[138] E.g. *Phd.* 62b2-6: ὁ … ἐν ἀπορρήτοις λεγόμενος … λόγος, a reference to the doctrine that the soul is imprisoned in the body as a punishment; cf. *Crat.* 400c, where the same theory is specifically attested as 'Orphic'. *Phd.* 69c3-d2: the founders of the mysteries actually used enigma to hide a philosophic truth (τῷ ὄντι πάλαι αἰνίττεσθαι) in their saying that the uninitiated will lie in the mud in the hereafter. At *Tim.* 40e a patently Orphic (see West 1983, 6) theogony

by priests[139] similarly served as a foundational text for the reading of religious traditions as hiding philosophic wisdom; although the ancients had a closer relationship with the gods that younger generations, the gods have not indeed fallen silent in Plotinus' time, and they, like the ancients, speak esoterically. This type of interpretation was developed in Middle Platonism, and became an important universal methodology in Late Platonism, as discussed in the following two chapters.

Secondly, Plato constructs metaphors whereby philosophy is equated with mystic initiation.[140] Socrates' long central narrative in the *Phædrus*,[141] the 'Mysteries of Diotima' in the *Symposium*[142] and numerous evocations of Bacchic and Orphic themes of initiation (as well as Orphic cosmology) in the *Phædo*[143] set a precedent for readings of philosophy as a mystery, and the mysteries as a form of esoteric philosophy.

These readings are found in Middle Platonism and were, by Plotinus' time, stock themes. This conflation of philosophy and mystery had several consequences, but the most important one for the present discussion was the importation of the tropes of mystic silence into the practice of philosophy. Plato's ideas on the privileging of knowledge, when combined with the rhetorical secrecy at the core of the culture of the mysteries, gave birth to a complex institution of rhetorical silence that we find informing Platonist writing in the late antique period at many levels.

The Silent Philosopher in Late Antiquity

Our discussion now moves forward more than half a millennium, to the second and third centuries CE, as we return to the questions asked at the beginning of this chapter: what concerns of privileged knowledge lie behind the oath of secrecy and its betrayal by Plotinus and his fellow students of Ammonius? Why would Plotinus seek strictly to control the publication of his works? And why would Porphyry choose to express himself in public in an intentionally obscure or secretive manner?

is recounted, the authority of which comes from the fact that it was delivered by 'those who have spoken before, the offspring of the gods, who ought to know their ancestors correctly'.

139 *Tim*. 72b: δι' αἰνιγμῶν, a rare masculine form of the term *enigma*.

140 *Tht*. 156a1, and the passages cited below.

141 *Phdr*. 246a–257b makes extensive use of mystic themes, especially of initiation, foreshadowed at 234d6–8, 244e3. See Riedweg 1987, 30–69.

142 201d-212a; cf. 218b5–7, where Alcibiades paraphrases a well-known Orphic verse on the exclusion of the uninitiated. See Casel 1919, 29; Riedweg 1987, 2–29. The 'Mysteries of Diotima' probably reflect an Orphic cosmology (see Rappe 2000, 149–157).

143 Philosophy as Bacchic mystery: *Phd*. 69c3–d2; cf. *Smp*. 618b3–4. Philosophic virtues as purifications: *Phd*. 69c1; see also n. 138. The cosmological myth near the end of the *Phædo* (107d–114c) may represent an adaptation of Orphic and Pythagorean materials (see Kingsley 1995, 79–111).

The background outlined in the previous sections will have made the answers to these questions clearer. In order further to clarify how late antique Platonism understood these early materials, it will be interesting to examine two broad developments in late antique thinking, especially relevant to Platonism. The first of these is the rise of the image of Plato as the quintessentially esoteric author, and the second is the popular understanding of the Pythagorean as an iconic representation of philosophic silence.

The Rise of the Silent Plato

It is unclear exactly when the idea of the esoteric Plato, understood in the full sense discussed above, arose.[144] However, to the Platonists (with some possible early exceptions) Plato was an author who had secret teachings. Moreover – and this is the point – he hid these teachings *within* his published works; in other words, the Platonists read the dialogues and epistles as esoteric writings with multiple hermeneutic levels. We cannot assume that all Middle Platonists took such a view of Plato (see page 93), but it is certainly the reading of the majority of surviving authors, and the idea of Plato as an esoteric writer, from the early second century CE, was the normal opinion, not only among Platonists, but in the more widespread culture of the empire.[145] Numenius of Apamea (*fl. c.* 150 CE) and Plutarch of Chæronea (*c.* 46–120 CE) are our best surviving examples of the esoteric reading of Plato among Middle Platonists, and a brief review of how each author portrays Plato's esotericism will help to understand how Plato's philosophic silence came to be understood in late antiquity.

We are fortunate to possess a text of Numenius giving Plato's reasons for hiding his true doctrine, the only extant fragment of a lost work entitled Περὶ τῶν παρὰ Πλάτωνι ἀπορρήτων, which we might translate as *On Plato's Secret Doctrines*.[146] The death sentence of Socrates, according to

[144] As discussed in Appendix D, p. 267 ff., our earliest solid evidence for the idea of Plato as a writer with a secret doctrine dates to the imperial period, but there are some indications for a date perhaps as early as the Hellenistic period. There is, however, a stubborn lack of solid evidence from the Classical period that Plato was seen as having secret doctrines.

[145] See p. 28. Origen (184/5–253/4), wishing to show that the apostles were intentionally silent on certain matters, says that they 'knew better than Plato which truths should be written and how they should be written, what must not under any circumstances be written for the multitude, what must be spoken, and what was not of that nature' (*Cels*. VI.6, translation Stroumsa 1996a, 34). Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c. 215) believed that all the Classical schools of philosophy, 'not just the Pythagoreans and Plato', hid many of their doctrines (*Strom*. V.9). In both cases, Plato has become synonymous with a style of writing designed both to hide and to reveal.

[146] Fr. 23. Petty 2011, 37 translates the title as *Concerning the Esoterica of Plato*. On this fragment see Lamberton 1989, 76; Stroumsa 1996a, 18; Athanassiadi 2006, 97–8; van Nuffelen 2011, 73–75.

Numenius, was what led Plato to write an esoteric discourse, since open expression of the truth had led the unlettered mob to take drastic action against the unwary sage. In Numenius' interpretation, it was the truth about traditional religion which was at stake: Plato's Euthyphro is a personification of the Athenians, embodying their boorish superstitions. This literary mask allowed Plato safely to criticise the traditional religion of the Athenians without risking their ire. Plato thus practised secrecy for safety, a concern which, as we have seen, seems not to have animated thinkers of the Classical period to any great extent. He published his secret doctrines in plain sight, but hidden behind a dramatic fiction.

A further passage gives us some perspective on how Numenius thought Plato practised this art of esoteric writing. In fragment 25, from the work *On the Academy's Abandonment of Plato,*[147] Numenius tells us that Socrates had been mistakenly thought by his contemporaries to speak haphazardly and to promulgate no settled doctrine, but was in fact 'setting forth three gods and philosophizing about them in the rhythms appropriate to each'.[148] Plato followed his master in this method of exposition (which Numenius attributes ultimately to Pythagoras):

> Plato was a Pythagorean. He knew that Socrates dispensed these same teachings from no other source but that one [i.e., Pythagoras], and that he [Socrates] had spoken in full awareness of this. In this way, therefore, he too bound things together, yet neither in a customary nor an obvious manner. And after arranging each detail in the way he considered most suitable, and concealing himself in between clarity and obscurity (ἐπικρυψάμενος ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ δῆλα εἶναι καὶ μῆ δῆλα), he wrote securely.

The attitude of Numenius to Plato's esoteric writing is thus quite similar to the 'art of writing' posited by Leo Strauss, whereby an author who wishes to express uncomfortable truths hides them in plain sight using subtle clues which alert the philosophic reader to the true subtext, but leave the masses either baffled or content with the decoy message that the text seems at first glance to promulgate.[149] This theory of writing is controversial in terms of

[147] On this work see p. 122.

[148] Fr. 25 ll. 41–43. The meaning here seems to be that Socrates spoke of each of these three gods who are of course Numenius' three primary intellects, and doubtless refer back to the Second Platonic Epistle (see p. 68) using a different mode of discourse appropriate to each. Compare the picture of Plato's methods drawn by Diogenes Laertius: 'Plato has employed varied terminology (ὀνόμασι κέχρηται ποικίλοις) in order not to make his writing easily intelligible to the ignorant' (63.1.1-2).

[149] On Strauss's theory of esoteric, or more properly exoteric, writing, see Appendix D, p. 270.

its usefulness as a critical tool, but it supplies a helpful model for the kind of esoteric writing Numenius wishes to indicate here.

Turning to Plutarch, we find a different approach to Plato's perceived esotericism. In a discussion of different theories of first principles in *On Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch tells us that

> Plato in many places 'disguises himself' (οἷον ἐπηλυγαζόμενος) and, using veiled language (παραλυπτόμενος), calls one of his opposed principles 'sameness' and the other 'otherness'. But in the *Laws*, being then more mature, he does not use enigmas or symbols (οὐ δι' αἰνιγμῶν οὐδὲ συμβολικῶς), but states using ordinary terminology (κυρίοις ὀνόμασιν) that the cosmos is not moved by a single soul, but perhaps by two, or at least no fewer than this. Of these two, one is the worker of good, and the other is its opposite, and the maker of opposites.[150]

Plato, then, used veiled language in some of his works, but in his later period spoke plainly. Note how Plutarch, wishing to find in Plato a dualist cosmology and able to find such a doctrine in the *Laws* without too much difficulty, reads the *Laws* as a straightforward work, but reads earlier Platonic writings, in which greater interpretative pains are needed to descry such a cosmology, as written esoterically. Reading Plato as an esotericist enables Plutarch to find his dualist doctrine in Plato as a whole. This is a fine example of philosophic 'harmonisation' carried out by means of esoteric reading, an exegetic manoeuvre which became very common in later Platonism, as the following chapters show.

Unlike Numenius, Plutarch is not suggesting any reasons for Plato's esotericism; it is simply taken as a given. But the fact that Plutarch feels no need to specify a motive or otherwise justify his claims is a sign that Plato's name was already associated with esoteric writing in Plutarch's late first-century milieu. Plutarch is also going beyond Numenius by positing a genuine esoteric hermeneutic which constitutes 'a general theory of meaning in literary texts'.[151] Plato is not merely writing 'between clarity and obscurity'; he is most definitely hiding his meaning in such a way that only the members of the philosophic elite will be able to recover it. As discussed in the following chapters, such esoteric hermeneutics shaped the way in which Platonists envisioned not only Plato, but the larger philosophic tradition to which they belonged. This passage, then, is an excellent early

[150] *De Is.* 48.370e9–f5. See on this passage Casel 1919, 93. 'Sameness' and 'Otherness' refer to Pl. *Tim.* 35a.

[151] Lamberton 1989, 76, n. 98.

example of a kind of reading which would become a normal interpretative strategy in the arsenal of Late Platonist exegesis: the uncovering of hidden meanings lying behind Plato's 'veiled language'. It is our best early example of the fully fledged Platonist reading of Plato as writing *more Platonico*, that is, esoterically.

Another passage from Plutarch sheds light on the different, but related, idea of the esoteric Aristotle. As discussed further in the following chapter, esoteric reading was one of the primary ways in which Platonists 'harmonised' the disparate sources from which they constructed their tradition, and the harmonisation of Aristotle with Plato became an important issue from Middle Platonism onward. Plutarch preserves, in his *Life of Alexander,* remnants of a fascinating pseudepigraphic correspondence between Alexander the Great and his teacher Aristotle, which shows that Aristotle had begun to be seen as an esoteric author in some circles from at least the first century BCE.[152]

We learn from Plutarch that Alexander had learned both the open teachings of Aristotle – the ethical and political materials – but also 'the secret and deeper teachings (τῶν ἀπορρήτων καὶ βαθυτέρων διδασκαλιῶν), which men call by the special terms "acroamatic" and "epoptic", and used not to reveal (οὐκ ἐξέφερον) to the many'.[153] Note the mystic terminology, which not only equates the teachings with mystic secrets, as ἀπόρρητα, but also equates learning them with the act of ἐποπτεία and revealing them with the criminal act of ἐκφέρειν, an example of the reading of philosophy as mystery. Plutarch goes on to cite a letter from Alexander to Aristotle: Alexander berates his teacher because he has heard that he has published his acroamatic works, which makes them common coin, and thus devalues them in Alexander's eyes.[154] Aristotle responds, however, that he has 'both published them and not published them', since the physical teachings in question are of no use as teaching materials, being written only as memoranda for those who had already received the full course of education.[155]

This passage is interesting in a number of respects. Aristotle's physical doctrines are presented as self-hiding secrets based specifically on the educational trope of Platonist elitism discussed above: 'the many' might read

[152] On the dating of these letters see Pépin 1984, 28, who speculates that they are influenced by Neopythagorean literary secrecy.
[153] Plut. *Alex.* 7.5, 668ab. On this passage see Boas 1953, 80; Pépin 1984, 27–28. On the epoptic division of philosophy according to Plutarch, see further n. 121.
[154] Plut. *Alex.* 7–8.
[155] *Ibid.* 8–9.

them, but they would be able to make nothing of what they read, not having the requisite philosophic training. Philosophic elitism could thus be conceived of both as a reason for concealment and as a reason for dispensing with concealment, since the openly expressed secret does away with the need for it. But these same teachings are hedged about by Plutarch with the motifs of revelation and silence. This is a good early example of the motifs of secrecy and silence being applied to the self-hiding secret, where one would have thought that they would be superfluous; we have already seen this combination in Plotinus, and shall see it again below. Aristotle was in possession of 'secret knowledge', and the conventions of philosophic silence demanded that it be treated as such, in this case with terms drawn from the mysteries; the fact that the secret is a self-hiding one is not directly relevant to this rhetorical fact, but in fact adds a complementary aspect of secrecy to the knowledge.

Perhaps most fascinatingly, Alexander, as quoted by Plutarch, seems to recognise the power-dynamics inherent in secret knowledge (perhaps because he is a politician). He fears that the knowledge might fall into the wrong hands, not for any of the reasons discussed above, but simply because the knowledge might be devalued if it were bruited about. He asks: 'In what will we excel over others, if these doctrines are learned by all?' Aristotle's reply is described as 'placating his love of honours' (τὴν φιλοτιμίαν αὐτοῦ παραμυθοῦμενος). 'Aristotle' placates 'Alexander' by reassuring him that the knowledge, though publically known, is still 'secret knowledge'. This awareness that the power of 'secret knowledge' may inhere in the secrecy, rather than in the knowledge, is a striking one, whether we attribute it to the authors of the Alexander-Aristotle correspondence or to Plutarch.

The 'Pythagorean' Philosopher in Late Antiquity

In late antiquity a number of depictions of 'Pythagorean' philosophers appear in which 'Pythagorean' is synonymous both with literal silence and with an extended concept of silence which is actually a superior form of discourse.[156] We can begin with a story recounted in Chapter 31 of Iamblichus' *On the Pythagorean Life*, the provenance of which is uncertain (and might belong to much earlier times – we do not know). The tale takes place at the time of the persecution of the Pythagoreans in southern Italy; in this

[156] Mortley 1986 contains exhaustive analysis of the development of the concept of silence as a kind of *logos* from the post-Hellenistic period onward.

account it is the tyrant Dionysius II of Syracuse (r. 367–357 BCE) who is doing the persecuting. We are thus in Classical antiquity, during the time of the flourishing of the putative Pythagorean societies.

Dionysius, being jealous that the Pythagoreans would not accept him into their sodality on account of his tyrannical ways, sends a force of troops to ambush some wandering members of the group (189). The Pythagoreans, being unarmed, turn and flee, but encounter a field of beans and so cannot proceed on account of the Pythagorean prohibition against beans (190). They turn at bay and make a stand to the last man, using improvised weapons (191). Having killed them all, the commander Eurymenês is dismayed, being under orders to bring back a Pythagorean for interrogation. However, his troops encounter two more Pythagoreans lagging behind the main group – Myllias the Crotonian and his pregnant wife Timycha the Lacedaimonian – and bring them to the tyrant (192). At this point the themes of philosophic silence emerge.

Dionysius begins by offering the two Pythagoreans co-regency with him out of his great respect for their philosophy – they of course refuse. He then offers to release them if they will tell him one thing: why their companions had preferred to die rather than to tread upon the beans. Myllias immediately replies, 'They were ready to die rather than tread on the beans, but I would rather die than tell you the reason for this not-treading-on-beans' (193). Dionysius orders that Myllias be taken away, and that Timycha be put to the torture, reasoning that a captive woman, deprived of her husband and pregnant, would be bound to talk. Timycha, fearing this very weakness on her own part, bites off her tongue and spits it out at Dionysius (194).

This gruesome tale contains several elements of interest. The first is the dramatic representation of the Pythagorean commitment to silence: they would rather die than break one of their precepts, but they would also rather die than reveal the mystic meaning behind the precept. This is a very literal portrayal of silence – these philosophers are simply refusing to divulge a secret – but read gesturally their actions convey lessons about the proper staunchness and reserve of the true philosopher, which bows to no pressure exerted by the unphilosophic world. Biting out one's own tongue is surely the most graphic possible representation of this stance. This brings us to a common trope of the silent philosopher tale: the way in which philosophic silence is shown as defeating the supreme power of the state. We may take it that Dionysius, who has been explicitly rejected by the Pythagoreans as unworthy to join their group, stands for the class of uninitiates generally, as well as representing all the pressures which the

worldly power can bring to bear on the philosophic initiate. In the context of Iamblichus' understanding of the Pythagorean philosophy as the philosophy *par excellence*, this tale conveys both the superiority of philosophy to any worldly power, and the power of the act of silence as the measure of this superiority.

Philostratus' third-century biography of Apollonius of Tyana contains these same themes, and amplifies them in what I take to be a typically late-antique fashion, depicting the act of silence as a powerful form of discourse. In this work Apollonius is described as a Pythagorean philosopher.[157] Philostratus explains his view of the ancient Pythagorean communities at the beginning of his book:

> Silence was imposed on them concerning divine things; for they heard many divine and secret matters (πολλὰ γὰρ θεῖά τε καὶ ἀπόρρητα ἤκουον), but it was difficult to control [this information] for anyone who had not first learned that to be silent is also to speak (ὅτι καὶ τὸ σιωπᾶν λόγος).[158]

Apollonius, as depicted by Philostratus, is not concerned with doctrinal niceties, but with the concrete representation of philosophical power.[159] His wisdom allows him to perform miracles such as raising the dead, appearing in two places at the same time and casting out of demons;[160] he does not seek to teach philosophy, but to exercise power through his mastery of it. Sometimes Apollonius' gestures of philosophic power take the form of a spoken silence. His doctrinal statements have the flavour of commonplaces drawn from late antique anthologies,[161] but his silences are intended to speak volumes.

Philostratus' Apollonius is asked why such a noble thinker and skilled speaker as himself has not written any book; he responds: 'Because I have not yet been silent.'[162] He then proceeds to maintain strict silence for a five-year period, a kind of latter-day Pythagorean initiation but without the Pythagorean brotherhood.[163] During this period of silence he is far from 'silent'; he roams the land dispensing wisdom and setting right the

[157] Apollonius may in fact have written a Pythagorean doxography, a biography of Pythagoras, or a single work combining elements of both (see Flinterman 1995, 77–78).

[158] *V.A.* I.1[53]. Cf. VI.2[19].

[159] See Smith 1987.

[160] *V.A.* IV.10: bilocation, casting out of demons; IV.45: raising a girl from the dead.

[161] Cf. Smith 1987, 70–71.

[162] *V.A.* I.14.4-5.

[163] *V.A.* I.14.18. Pythagoras is not mentioned in this context, and this incident, as well as a passage at I.16.31, seems to represent a garbled echo of the tradition of the Pythagorean five-year silent novitiate.

affairs of men. Philostratus tells us that he is able to quell civil disturbances caused by hooligans through sheer silent *gravitas* (I.15), and relates one incident (I.15.17 *ad fin.*) where Apollonius finds the citizens of a town starving because of grain hoarding by profiteers, and manages to arrange that the governor be properly chastened, the population fed and the guilty parties publically rebuked, all by means of hand gestures, silent facial indications, and, in the case of the profiteers, by the expedient of writing down his judgement on a tablet and having the governor read it out to the assembled populace. The theme of silence as discourse is here given a narrative form.

Apollonius' mastery of silence is also a form of wisdom. When Apollonius first meets his right-hand man Damis, the latter offers to serve as his interpreter on their travels throughout the barbarian lands. But Apollonius declines this service, stating that he understands all the languages of mankind, although he has never learned them. When Damis is awed at this show of wisdom, Apollonius says: 'Do not wonder if I know all the tongues of men, for I even know the secrets of men's silences' (οἶδα γὰρ δὴ καὶ ὅσα σιωπῶσιν ἄνθρωποι).[164] Silence is understood as a superior form of discourse to language.

Another philosopher whose silence is depicted as discourse is 'Secundus, the Silent Philosopher', whose exploits are recorded in an anonymous account dating probably from the latter half of the second century.[165] This work begins: 'Secundus was a philosopher. This man cultivated wisdom all his days and observed silence religiously, having chosen the Pythagorean way of life.' There seems to be not the slightest trace of Pythagorean themes or doctrine present in this work: to be Pythagorean means, for the author, simply to be a philosopher who does not speak.[166]

Whoever the historical Secundus may have been,[167] in this text he serves as a kind of symbol of silence as wisdom. The story runs thus: Secundus becomes famous for his wisdom and his absolute devotion to silence. The emperor Hadrian decides to test his devotion, and, having summoned him, puts Secundus through various tests to attempt to persuade him to speak, and then to force him on pain of death. To no avail: a tribune whom

[164] I.19.19–21.

[165] Perry 1964 is an edition and translation of this interesting work, from which I cite the translations; on the text and dating see *ibid.* 1–10.

[166] Cf. Thorndyke 1923, I, 258; Perry 1964, 7–8. Perry suggests (9–10, citing Porph. *V.P.* 370, Iamb. *V.P.* 81–82 = DK 58c4) that the question and answer section of the work, with its τί ἐστι· format, may reflect traditional Pythagorean tropes. This may be, but the doctrines contained in Secundus' *sententiae* seem to owe more to *florilegia* than to any specific philosophical tradition.

[167] Perry 1964, 2–4 argues that a historical Secundus existed, although there are no certain attestations to him besides this text.

Hadrian tasks with making Secundus speak replies that, 'You might persuade lions and leopards and other beasts to speak with a human voice before you persuade an unwilling philosopher.'[168] When all his efforts prove ineffectual, the philosopher remaining true to his vow of silence even unto death, the emperor summons him back, admits that he is indeed a wise man, and puts a series of questions to him. These questions, dealing with stock doxographical themes such as 'What is man?' and 'What is intellect?', are answered by Secundus in the manner we have already seen used by Apollonius, by writing the answers on a tablet.

Here, then, we have a depiction of philosophic silence in its most literal form, but, just as with the kinds of written silence found in Platonism, the fact of silence does not deter discourse. In fact, it is Secundus' stubborn silence that allows there to be any discourse at all, since Hadrian had instructed his headsman to kill him if he uttered a word. It is worth noting a few points here. No reason whatever is given for Secundus' silence; I take this to indicate that, in the second century, the idea that a philosopher might choose absolute silence was familiar enough to the general reading public, probably through popular traditions about Pythagoreanism, that no explanation was thought necessary. Philosophic silence, in its most literal form, had attained to the status of a well-known trope. Apollonius' gnomic silences are similarly signs that this was the case; while Philostratus does nod to the tradition of Pythagorean esotericism at the beginning of his book, no further context is given for Apollonius' silence. Stobæus preserves what seem to be stock encomia of silence – 'For to the many silence is the cure for evils, and it is especially the way of the wise man', and 'There is naught greater than to keep silence' – which similarly point to the tropological character of the figure of the silent philosopher.[169]

The instances of spoken silence discussed above evoke not simple philosophic elitism, but a wisdom granting true power; in the case of Apollonius, miraculous abilities. The power of philosophic silence is also expressed, in all three stories discussed, as social power: this is demonstrated in various ways by the Pythagoreans' defiance of the tyrant Dionysius in Iamblichus' account, by Secundus' triumphant encounter with Hadrian and by Apollonius' ability to stem riots and civil disturbances through the power of his philosophic silence. Apollonius' story actually

[168] Perry 1964, 72. Translation mine.

[169] Πολλοῖς γὰρ ἀνθρώποισι φάρμακον κακῶν σιγή, μάλιστα δ'ἐστὶ σώφρονος τρόπον.; Οὐκ ἔστι κρεῖττον τοῦ σιωπᾶν οὐδὲ ἕν. Gnomic statements attributed to 'Karkinos' and 'Amphidos'; Stob. XXXIII 1, 6. Cf. Plu. 2.504a: 'Silence is profound and sober; drunkenness is a prattler' (βαθὺ ἡ σιγὴ καὶ νηφάλιον, ἡ δὲ μέθη λάλον).

raises the stakes of political influence; where Iamblichus' Pythagoreans heroically defy a Hellenic tyrant and Secundus demonstrates his superiority to the power of a single emperor, Apollonius is shown running rings around two emperors, as well as sundry lesser potentates;[170] in these cases he does not exercise literal silence, but it is his privileged knowledge and spiritual power which allow him to deal with worldly power from such an unassailable position of strength.

I would suggest that the symbol of the philosopher whose inaccessible wisdom makes him the superior to emperors is a narrative echo of an idea of wisdom actually current in Late Platonism. In late antiquity intense struggles were taking place for intellectual power, and the idea of privileged knowledge of the Platonist specialist was a major weapon in these struggles; these biographical narratives of silent philosophers, I will argue below, are narrative expressions of a cultural dynamic which sought increasingly to locate the power of the philosophic specialist not in the open agora of disputation and philosophic discourse, but in the closed realm of the secret and the ineffable.

Toward a Model of Plotinus as Silent Philosopher

It is not yet the place to present a full analysis of Platonist philosophic silence in the late antique period, but a certain picture of a culture valuing privileged knowledge – and the act of publically adverting to privileged knowledge – should already be coalescing. Let us return to the Porphyrian passages cited at the beginning of the present chapter. The oath of Plotinus' fellow students not to reveal their teacher's doctrines was presented, we recall, mainly as a matter of not publishing them in written form. This incident, like Plotinus' own reluctance to publish, make perfect sense as products of a culture of Platonist philosophic silence, where the themes of privileged orality and philosophic elitism informed basic assumptions about the transmission of certain knowledge. These assumptions would explain the mindset behind Plotinus' actions: as a philosopher seeking to follow the standards of deportment inherited from the traditional materials

[170] Apollonius shows a suave philosophic indifference to the emperor Nero (*V.A.* 4.42-4) and, thrown into captivity by the emperor Domitian, whom he has defied, is fully prepared to deliver an admonishing oration on the excellence of philosophers (and their superiority to mere emperors) to Domitian (8.7), but instead transports himself miraculously out of captivity (8.8). This undelivered oration, given by Philostratus in full but of course never delivered to Domitian in the course of the narrative, is perhaps not an example of philosophic silence, but its presence in Philostratus' *Life* shows the same preference for rhetoric over dialectic that often characterises the theme. See Edwards 2000, xxii.

surveyed above, we should expect Plotinus to regard written philosophy as potentially a dangerous broadcasting of knowledge.

These background assumptions will also have informed Porphyry's inclusion of these episodes in his biography. As the 'Pythagorean' examples cited above show, literal philosophic silence could be depicted as an enactment of philosophic virtue. I would argue that Porphyry's depiction of Plotinus as epitomising the specifically Platonist virtues of philosophic silence – distrust of publication, emphasis on oral instruction and a general reluctance to disseminate certain doctrines – is a comparable instance of biographic practice. In both cases, a proper concern with hiding the highest wisdom is depicted as an important philosophic quality, and of course implies that the philosopher in question has 'secret knowledge' which others do not possess, but which is worth possessing.

What has troubled scholars about these stories in Porphyry is the fact that Plotinus broke both the oath and his own early determination not to publish,[171] but Porphyry does not seem to find this at all problematic.[172] This should not trouble us either, if we see these accounts of Porphyry's in their context. In all the early instances of rhetorical hiding discussed in this chapter, it is difficult to find a single case where the notional secret under discussion was actually kept secret: from the invocations of mystic silence in Parmenides and Empedocles to the many discourses flagged by Plato as ancient secrets, these acts of verbal hiding tend to lead directly to revelation of the 'secret' – indeed, they prepare the reader for the reception of 'secret knowledge', with the increased sense of privilege and power that this brings.[173] If we consider the whole background culture of Platonist written silence, along with its attendant tropes, before approaching this biographical material, Porphyry's presentation of Plotinus' actions signifies what it was intended to signify: not only that Plotinus exercised due care in his distribution of knowledge, but that the knowledge he possessed – the doctrines of Ammonius – was 'secret knowledge'. Porphyry is flagging Plotinus' wisdom as precisely the kind of secret knowledge that appears fleetingly in the Seventh and Second Platonic Epistles, or hidden within

[171] See O'Brien 1994, 118–21.

[172] We might compare an episode early in the *Life* (Porph. *Plot.* 1): Plotinus refuses to sit for a portrait out of philosophical denigration of the world of bodies, but his students smuggle in a sculptor to make one in secret. Again, Plotinus is right to exercise philosophic reserve, but it is also right to break this reserve once it has been established that the philosopher is properly 'silent'.

[173] Cherlonneix 1992, 385 notes that, contrary to his usual practice, Porphyry does not name his source for the anecdote of the oath of secrecy, an act of secrecy surrounding secrecy that has fired the imagination of researchers; this extra touch of secrecy would of course have had the same effect on Porphyry's intended readership.

the *symbola* of the Pythagorean tradition. Plotinus' acts of concealment and revelation as depicted by Porphyry are narrative examples of Platonist philosophic silence.

The incident of Porphyry's 'mystic' poem also falls into place when understood against the backdrop of philosophic silence. Plotinus' appreciative response to the esoteric presentation of Porphyry makes sense in light of the Platonic precedent for equating the mysteries and philosophy. We note that the key ritual players from mystery cult are represented in this episode: we have Porphyry as the figure of the hierophant, Plotinus as the *mystês* whose knowledge of the initiatory secret allows him to penetrate the veil of symbolic language and the unnamed heckler in the crowd standing for the uninitiated masses. The self-serving aim of Porphyry's narrative here is clear, and should alert us to the ways in which philosophic silence, in this case the themes of initiated silence drawn from the philosophic reading of mystery cult, could act as a source of social capital; as the 'hierophant' of the episode, Porphyry actually stands above Plotinus' *mystês* in spiritual 'rank' – symbolically 'initiating' his master – even as the two of them are separated and put on a higher level from the unphilosophic, uninitiated masses.

Turning to the important passage describing Plotinus' (and Porphyry's) union with the One beyond being, it should now be clear that Porphyry's description of this state as 'in unspeakable/ineffable reality' (ἐν ἐνεργείᾳ ἀῤῥήτῳ) is more than a statement that it cannot be put into words – it also evokes the silence of the mysteries, transposing the dichotomy of initiated and profane into a Late Platonist context. In a sense, every reference to an ineffable truth is in fact a reference to a secret hidden in plain sight, no different structurally from the physical teachings of Aristotle in the Alexander correspondence cited by Plutarch or the enigma of the second Platonic epistle. This passage is an example of the fullest expression of Platonist philosophic silence – the simultaneous use of rhetorics of secrecy *and* silence, the conflation of that which must not be revealed with that which cannot be revealed.

CHAPTER 3

Perennial Wisdom and Platonist Tradition

Fabulae et symbola verum et demonstrant et tegunt, produnt et tacent.
Casel 1919, 91, on Plutarch.

Plotinus describes himself, not as an innovative thinker or the founder of any philosophical system, but as an exegete of 'the ancients'. He tells his readers: 'Our doctrines are not novel, nor are they modern: they were said long ago, but not openly. Our present doctrines are explanations of those older ones, and the words of Plato himself show that they are ancient.'[1] It is widely agreed that Plotinus was indeed engaged in exegesis of a philosophic textual tradition owing its greatest debt to the Platonic dialogues,[2] and his work, while usually described as 'Neoplatonist', is better described simply as 'Platonist'. Plotinus would not have understood the term 'Neoplatonist', and saw himself as a philosopher in the same tradition as Plato.[3]

But a further aspect of Plotinus' express view of his philosophical project, encapsulated in the quotation above, is that his doctrines are not presented as 'Platonist' doctrines; they are presented as explanations of ancient *logoi*, stemming from a deeper tradition of which Plato is himself a part, rather than an originator. In other words, Plato is seen as a strong exemplar of the philosophy of the ancients, and by showing that one is in agreement with Plato, one can show that one is in agreement with that philosophy.

An aspect of the problem of ineffability not yet touched upon is the problem of transmission; how might a textual or other tradition discuss, teach, or otherwise transmit knowledge of the unthinkable, the unsayable? One possible answer to this question is suggested by the structures of Platonist philosophy: since the Forms are eternal truths, access to the Forms (and, for Plotinus, access to *nous,* the location of the Forms)

[1] V.1[10]8.10–12, translation based on Hadot 1993, 17–18.
[2] See e.g. Charrue 1978, 17–41; Fowden 1982, 38; Dillon 1992; Hadot 1993, 17–18.
[3] E.g. Charrue 1978, 16 and n. 7; Blumenthal 1996, 82.

guarantees the philosophic seeker an atemporal, unchanging reservoir of truth upon which he may draw through personal philosophic *anagôgê*.[4] This method of accessing the truth is insisted upon by Plotinus, and much in the *Enneads* may be read as detailed instructions for attaining to this type of knowledge;[5] the texts of Plato and other great philosophers would then be the textual concomitant of this philosophic truth. But texts transmit *knowledge*; what tradition can transmit that which transcends knowledge and speech?

A tempting answer is: The Neoplatonist tradition. Sara Rappe sees the attempt at a textual incorporation of the ineffable as a central dynamic of Late Platonist writing.[6] Reading Plotinus, we find that he gives a similar answer to this question; he constructs just such an 'unwritten' textual tradition as Rappe sees in late Platonism, but he locates this tradition in the Hellenic past. Plotinus sometimes finds the unwritable truth of transcendence embedded, or culturally located, in very concrete historical instances, textual and otherwise: in Platonic dialogues, of course, and in the riddling phrases of Presocratic philosophers, but also in myths, religious rituals and oracles. This tradition is conceived by Plotinus as a perennial wisdom with immemorial origins. As we might expect from the Platonist premise noted above, that philosophic wisdom is eternal and unchanging; paradoxically, however, he locates it simultaneously within history, and thus in the world of body and of change, and most interestingly for the present inquiry, defines it esoterically. The 'truth' of the One's ineffability is not explained by the great tradition; it is *hidden within* that tradition. The conception of tradition held by Plotinus is thus very important for understanding his approach to philosophic silence; Plotinian exegesis is often explicitly presented as a process of unveiling the hidden.

It is important to keep in mind that there are two concepts of 'tradition' at work in scholarly studies of Plotinus: on the one hand, the concept of Neoplatonism, or simply of Platonism, constructions which rightly refer us to the Platonists' use of Platonic materials as dogmatic texts for exegesis, and, on the other, the traditions constructed by the Platonists themselves. When we pay attention to these conceptions of tradition, we find that the

[4] See e.g. V.8[31]4.36–7; V.8[31]5.5–9; cf. Hadot 1993, 40; Eon 1970, 260–261. Access to truth through *nous* is discussed on p. 202 ff.

[5] See Rist 1964b, 87–112 for an interpretation of this process in Plotinus.

[6] 'It would not be an exaggeration to say that Neoplatonism conceives itself as a tradition that is forced to allude to something like the principle of ineffability as the final authority for its exegetical authenticity. Absurd as this may seem at first glance, what the Neoplatonists attempt at all costs is no less than a textual incorporation of the ineffable (Rappe 2000, 119–120).'

Platonists tend not to define themselves as such; in fact, while Plotinus ardently defends his own agreement with the philosophy of Plato, he *never* defines himself as a 'Platonist', many scholarly assertions to the contrary notwithstanding.[7]

The purpose of the present chapter is to present the evidence which survives for construction of tradition, and of self-definition in terms of that tradition, in earlier Platonism, with a view to contextualising Plotinus' own self-definition and esoteric hermeneutics. Plotinus' ideas about his tradition have often escaped notice or been underplayed in scholarly literature, perhaps partly because they operate in the background of his work, and he rarely feels the need to state them explicitly; this, however, ought to alert us to their fundamental importance to his thought, as basic assumptions lying behind his use of the philosophical tradition, rather than cause us to discount these assumptions as unimportant to his philosophy. By examining the Middle Platonists we can flesh out Plotinus' own ideas of the perennial tradition to which he feels he belongs and bring them to the foreground.

Philosophic Lineage and Perennial Wisdom in Platonism

To this end, a brief overview of certain aspects of post-Hellenistic philosophical culture is in order, followed by an outline of the Platonist perennialism which rose to prominence in the first and second centuries CE, which will elucidate many statements found in the *Enneads* concerning the nature of the true philosophical tradition and its esoteric character.

Hairesis *and the Exegetic Turn in Post-Hellenistic Philosophy*

To begin with, we may note the formalisation of philosophical allegiance, beginning in the Hellenistic period, which became a structural norm of philosophy as a practice and as a genre thereafter.[8] One was, for the most part, not simply a philosopher; one was a philosopher of a given school. This is not to say that writings and discourses of philosophers ceased to

[7] See Appendix A, p. 253 ff.

[8] D.L. 1.17-21; the term αἵρεσις occurs more than forty times in this work, as does διαδοχή and its cognates, showing the degree of importance attached to school-lineage. Cf. S.E. *P.* I.1-17. On the rise of 'schoolcraft' in post-Hellenistic philosophy generally see Glucker 1978, 166–206; Hadot 1979; Sedley 1989, 97; Boys-Stones 2001, 130–131; Trapp 2007, 13. For a good general discussion with special reference to Epicureanism, see Sedley 1989 *passim.*

differ widely, or that these schools represented monolithic orthodoxies;[9] the point here is one of philosophic *identity*. This identity was defined most usually in our period as *hairesis*. This term, meaning 'lineage' or 'school of thought', implies both the transmission of a certain intellectual content and corresponding loyalties and antipathies vis à vis competing schools.[10] In the late antique period *hairesis* also seems increasingly to betoken a concern with what may (somewhat inexactly) be called 'orthodoxy';[11] it is used by Plotinus only in a context where his version of philosophic truth is threatened by what is seen as a perversion of the true tradition.[12]

A second broad development in philosophy, related to the rise of self-definition by lineage, arose later, in the post-Hellenistic period: it might be called the 'exegetic turn', whereby philosophers increasingly sought to situate their search for truth in terms of a canon of privileged texts.[13] De Haas proposes, in this regard, a division of the history of late ancient philosophy into two periods, the first (from the beginning of the post-Hellenistic period until about Plotinus' time) a period of 'establishing the universal truth' and the second (from the time of Plotinus' successors until the Arab conquest) of 'exploring the universal truth.'[14] This is a useful generalisation, and with the obvious[15] and less obvious exceptions[16] to the

[9] Cf. Rist 1964b, 57. See Lim 1995, esp. 31–69 on disputation, dialectic and competition between Platonist philosophers.

[10] See Glucker 1978, 166–206 for a detailed discussion of this term, the related terms σχολή and διατριβή, and their Latin equivalents. The latter terms refer to institutions (*ibid.* 159), while αἵρεσις refers to a school of thought in the broad sense; it is the most apt ancient term for what is meant by the modern 'Neoplatonism'.

[11] See Athanassiadi 2006, 19–22 on *hairesis* generally, and *ibid.* 21–22 for the increasing use of *hairesis* in the late antique to indicate perverse or wrong choice of allegiance.

[12] The term appears in Plotinus with the meaning under discussion only in his attack on the Gnostics (II.9[33]6.6. and 15.4; see further p. 135). In Porphyry's *Life* the Christians and others (clearly Gnostics, judging from the texts which Porphyry says they read) in Plotinus' circle are αἱρετικοὶ δὲ ἐκ τῆς παλαιᾶς φιλοσοφίας (16.2; see Athanassiadi 2006, 129–130).

[13] See generally Athanassiadi-Fowden 1981, 149; Hadot 1987, 14–23; Armstrong 1990c, 414; De Haas 2003, 253–254; van Nuffelen 2011, 2–3.

[14] 2003, 242–243.

[15] An obvious and prominent exception to this model is the Sceptical Academy, and perhaps this is an exception which proves the rule, insofar as the Sceptics' rejection of any universal truth as a basic methodological principle was an approach which fell dramatically out of favour from the first century CE onwards.

[16] One possible objection to this generalisation is based on an *argumentum e silentio*, but still in my view worth noting; namely, that authors of this period who *did* pursue a more aporetic or inconclusive approach to philosophic reasoning, or who did not base their arguments on the authoritative philosophers of the past, would have *ipso facto* been unlikely to have achieved much recognition, and were hence unlikely to have been copied in the manuscript tradition, precisely because of the rise of the exegetical approach and the increasing school 'orthodoxy' of mainstream philosophic culture. The example of Galen stands out as a notable exception and our sole surviving exemplar of a second-century philosopher who made strong claims to originality (see Trapp 2007, 17–18), but

rule, provides a fairly apt overview of broader developments in philosophical culture in the Roman Empire. Epicurus might have claimed to have learned nothing from his teachers, or Arcesilaus have berated Zeno for lack of originality,[17] but for a Stoic, Epicurean, or Platonist to have made similar claims seems to have been unthinkable from the late post-Hellenistic period. As Armstrong observes,[18] the authority of philosophic founders commonly did not extend to the tradition as a whole; one could and did disagree vociferously even with one's immediate teachers, but never with the canonic authors themselves. Likewise, it could be seen as a bad thing to have copied the ideas of a more recent thinker (as we deduce from Plotinus' having been accused of plagiarising Numenius),[19] but never a bad thing to have copied (or, rather, correctly expressed) the ideas of a canonical authority.

An important phenomenon involving both school-allegiance and the exegetic approach in post-Hellenistic and later philosophy is the movement toward 'harmonisation' of various schools or thinkers under the *aegis* of one's chosen allegiance. As Ilsetraut Hadot rightly points out, the search for 'harmony' (συμφωνία/*concordia*) between different philosophers was not a naive quest for total identification of doctrine, as many scholars have made it out to be, with the result that ancient philosophical commentators end up looking as though they had an absurdly shallow understanding of the traditions to which they subscribed.[20] Philosophic harmonisation was rather the process by which an essential core of agreement was discovered beneath or in spite of acknowledged differences of thought.

This took many forms. We see it already in speculations preserved by Cicero as to the fundamental unity of all the 'Socratic schools', who differ 'more in terminology than in ideas',[21] and it seems to have been a main component of Antiochus of Ascalon's philosophical project.[22] The position of Aristotle vis à vis Plato was the most outstanding issue in need of harmonisation for the Platonists,[23] and was a hotly contested issue at all times; the anti-Peripatetic second-century Platonist Atticus wrote an

his works were primarily medical, and so their survival is congruent with this conjecture, which should be understood as applying to philosophy strictly understood.

17 Cic. *Ac.* II.16.1–4; Plut. *Colot.* 1121e–1122f.

18 1990c, 425.

19 Porph. *Plot.* 17.

20 See Hadot 2015, 41.

21 *Ac.* II 15.12-20: … *Peripateticos et Academicos, nominibus differentis, re congruentis, a quibus Stoici ipsi verbis magis quam sententiis dissenserunt* (13–15).

22 Cic. *N.D.* I.16; see Dillon 1977, 52–106; Boys-Stones 2001, 128; Trapp 2007, 16.

23 See in general Hadot 1993, 17–18; Karamanolis 2006; Hadot 2015.

Against Those Who Undertake to Interpret Plato's Doctrines Through Those of Aristotle,[24] and Numenius, writing at roughly the same time, sees Aristotle's work as an entirely separate tradition from Plato,[25] while, on the other side, Antiochus of Ascalon is reported by Cicero to have defended the essential unity of the Academy and Peripatos,[26] and Porphyry explicitly embraces Aristotle as a follower of Plato.[27] The fifth-century Hierocles of Alexandria seems to have believed that mischievous later philosophers actually bastardised (νοθεῦσαι) the works of Plato to make it *seem* as though he and Aristotle had disagreed, when in fact they, like other philosophers including Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Plutarch of Athens, were all part of a single divine tradition.[28] The matter seems to have been ultimately resolved in unanimous favour of Aristotle's inclusion in the canon,[29] although observers continued to question the appropriateness of this harmonisation well into late antiquity.[30]

Perennial Wisdom in Platonism

Against this historical background of school-loyalty and exegesis, which helped set the doxographical structure of post-Hellenistic philosophic debate, the powerful idea of a perennial tradition of truth arose. It has been widely noted that certain currents of philosophy in the Roman Empire increasingly theorised, from about the first century CE, that an ancient tradition of truth had existed, traceable back to the earliest times.[31] Van Nuffelen rightly argues that the first appearance of this idea should be pushed back to the first century BCE on the basis of evidence from Varro and others,[32] but the work of earlier scholars tracing the widespread rise of

[24] Πρὸς τοὺς διὰ τῶν Ἀριστοτέλους τὰ Πλάτωνος ὑπισχνουμένους. Fragments of this work are preserved in Eusebius; see Des Places 1977, 8–9.

[25] Fr. 24.53–5.

[26] *Ac. II.* 15 ff.; *Fin.* 5.7.

[27] Porphyry wrote a lost work entitled *On the Unity of the School* [hæresis] *of Plato and Aristotle*. See Edwards 2000, xxxi-ii.

[28] Ap. Phot. *Bibl.* 214, 173a18–40.

[29] Cf. Hadot 2015, 17. Edwards 2000, lii describes the harmony of Plato and Aristotle as a late antique Platonist 'dogma' (*ibid.* xi).

[30] Writing in the sixth century, Elias attacks Iamblichus for suppressing the differences between Plato and Aristotle (see Edwards 2000, lii).

[31] E.g. De Haas 2003, 251: '… The vexed issue of the criterion of truth was surpassed by the growing belief in a universal truth from which all human wisdom had drawn since times immemorial … From the first century AD onwards most philosophers came to treat the history of philosophy as a series of attempts at unfolding and exploring this single truth.' Cf. Festugière 1981, I, 20–26; Hadot 1987, 23 ff.; Whittaker 1987, 120–121; O'Meara 1989, 13.

[32] van Nuffelen 2011, 27–45.

what this book calls perennialism is right to date it to around the latter half of the first century CE,[33] which accords well with the concurrent rise of the exegetic approach, which led to a natural turning of the philosophic gaze toward the past as a repository of truth.[34]

While Platonism was an exegetical movement and the product of an exegetical age, 'perennialism', as I wish to define it, was more than simply an exegetical approach to a hallowed tradition.[35] The idea in its most basic form, that knowledge of the truth is as old as humankind or even eternal, has been seen as arising in later Stoicism,[36] the thought of Posidonius of Rhodes having exerted special influence in this regard.[37] The claim for a wisdom as old as mankind might at any rate make sense in terms of Stoic cosmology, where innate *logos* serves as a constant source of truth inherent in the structure of the universe. The Platonic Forms serve an analogous function for followers of Plato, as mentioned above; perhaps this ideological framework was one factor which led to the widespread adoption of perennialism as a common, or even a characteristic, trait of Platonism from about the first century CE onward.

The Platonist perennial tradition came to be seen as a kind of instantiation, in time and space, of transcendent truths from outside of that realm. Note that, while such a tradition transmits authority, it can only be said to transmit truth in a certain sense. Hermeneutically, Platonist perennialists read Plato and other authors whom they regarded as canonical not only as thinkers, but also as textual transmitters of a truth existing eternally outside of text. Eon has characterised Plotinus' reading of traditional authors as an exegesis of eternal concepts (ἐννοίαι) which are transmitted by thinkers such as Plato, but which exist independently and eternally;[38] in other words, the truth found in texts precedes the texts, and, inasmuch as it is an atemporal truth, transcends history. All Platonist philosophers are thus in a sense exegetes of a non-textual truth.[39]

[33] See n. 31.

[34] Cf. Frede 1997, 220; 229–230.

[35] The term 'perennialism' is chosen deliberately: Agostino Steuco's 1540 *de perenni philosophia* introduced the term 'perennial philosophy' to the world (see Schmitt 1970, 506), formulating just such a transhistorical conception of the history of truth, *mutatis mutandis*, as held by perennialist Platonists (see Hanegraaff 2012, 8–9; 212–213).

[36] See Frede 1994, 5193–5194. The bare idea of an ancient wisdom may of course be pushed back considerably further in Greek intellectual history (e.g. Boys-Stones 2001, 3–17, who begins his account of the rise of the idea of a 'primitive truth' with the Hesiodic and early Orphic accounts of the lost golden age).

[37] Boys-Stones 2001, 45–49, citing Sen. *Ep.* 65.

[38] Eon 1970, 260–261.

[39] Cf. Krämer 1964, 16 ff; Lamberton 1989, 69; Rappe 2000, 122.

The atemporality of this truth may be expressed in terms of its *ubiquity* throughout history and culture: as will be shown below, the historical manifestations of the ahistorical truth may include, for Platonist perennialists, both Hellenic and barbarian cultural institutions (in other words, the true account may be seen as a transcultural phenomenon). This atemporal quality of the tradition also commonly appears through reference to a past without a beginning; that is to say, while a concrete historical chain of events and history of ideas may be constructed in the antique equivalent of the historical period (as, for example, Numenius' detailed discussion of the chain of transmission from Pythagoras to Plato, and then of the perversion of philosophic transmission which took place subsequently),[40] the details of this history fade into an undefined past, populated by sages and theologians.[41] The perennial wisdom is thus the immemorial wisdom, a tradition without a beginning.

We do not find a perennialist stance in every Middle Platonist; we have little reason to suspect such an approach in Atticus, for example,[42] and Alcinoüs presents himself simply as expounding Plato, making no attempt to situate Plato within a larger tradition. Proclus refers to these thinkers as the 'literalists'.[43] On the other hand, we find in Plutarch an extensive use of the themes of perennialism (identified below), and there is no doubt that he believed in an ancient wisdom and saw his own work as a continuation of it.[44] Maximus of Tyre, generally considered a Platonising sophist, shows a classicising respect for Homer and the very ancient Hellenic tradition which amounts at times to a 'scriptural' approach to these texts.[45] We may place Numenius and Celsus in the category of fully fledged Platonist perennialists:[46] they theorise an immemorial tradition of truth of

[40] See p. 122. Cf. Frede 1994, 5201: 'Neither Celsus nor any Platonist will think that the truth is historical. But Celsus clearly does think that the reception of the true account is subject to historical change.'

[41] Cf. Charrue 1978, 19: while Plotinus' ancients are to be understood as a concrete lineage with a definite membership, the sages and theologians who precede them inhabit an indeterminate historical space, 'un avant *indéterminé* et *inconnu*'.

[42] The surviving fragments of Atticus' *Against Those Who Undertake to Interpret Plato's Doctrines Through Those of Aristotle* goes against the trend in harmonisation, showing a concern with the dialectical issues without reference to a chain of authorities.

[43] As noted by Whittaker 1987, 120, Proclus (*in Tim.* III.234.15 ff; cf. III.247.13 ff., I.284.13 ff.) refers to such authors as Alcinoüs and Atticus as 'following Plato to the letter' (ἕπεσθαι τῇ λέξει κρίναντες).

[44] See van Nuffelen 2011, 55–65. See *ibid.* 65 n. 102 for further Plutarchian references to the ancient wisdom.

[45] See Oration 26.2-3: Plato's status as a great philosopher is predicated upon his understanding of the 'philosophy of Homer'. See Heath 2013, 152–162.

[46] On elements of perennialism in Numenius see Armstrong 1990a, 425–426; Frede 1994, 5194; van Nuffelen 2011, 72–78. Celsus' lost treatise, *The True Account*, written some time after the year

which Plato forms a part, they read this tradition as innately authoritative and their conception of tradition involves further characteristic elements of Platonist perennialism, to which we now turn.

The 'Ancients' and the Ancient Sages

Perennialism as we find it developed in some Middle Platonists and Plotinus is more than the basic idea of an ancient tradition of wisdom, and contains ideological, hermeneutic and rhetorical characteristics which mark it more especially as Platonist. Ideologically, Platonist perennialism situates the tradition that we call Platonism as part of a chain of transmission of what might be called, following Boys-Stones, 'strong authority',[47] or following the second-century Platonist Celsus, 'the true account' (ὁ ἀληθὴς λόγος). While privileging Plato's position in this transmission as pre-eminent, Platonist perennialism sees Plato as merely a link in, rather than the beginning of, the 'golden chain'.[48] Indeed, he is sometimes, as in Plotinus' work, rhetorically situated at the *end* of the pristine phase of that tradition,[49] an idea perhaps predicated on the widespread belief that humanity in general had undergone a decline in vigour, philosophic virtue and simple rude health since ancient times.[50]

The most important trope of Platonist perennialism is that of 'the Ancients' (most commonly referred to by Plotinus as οἱ παλαιοί). This term derived stylistically from the references in Plato, discussed in the preceding chapter, to unnamed, ancient predecessors, often Orphic and Pythagorean, but seems to be post-Classical in the sense in which it was used by the Platonists,[51] to refer to philosophic thinkers of the Classical period and earlier.[52] Boys-Stones points to two uses of οἱ παλαιοί in

160 (see Dillon 1977, 400; Frede 1994, 5188–5190), is the earliest known Platonist perennialist text according to the full definition outlined in this chapter (cf. Hadot 1987, 24; Frede 1994, 5184; 5194).

47 Boys-Stones 2001, 102–105. Cf. Armstrong 1990c, 415, whose 'traditionalism', defined as 'the acceptance of an absolute traditional authority', is much the same as my idea of perennialism, except for my stipulation of an immemorial or transcendent origin.

48 Boys-Stones 2001, 118–122. See e.g. Celsus ap. Orig. *Cels.* VI.10: Plato does not claim to have made any discoveries, but simply defends received doctrine. Cf. Plut. *de Is.* 56–57; 60; 77.

49 See p. 128. Cf. Frede 1994, 5198–5199; Boys-Stones 2001, 117, with n. 35.

50 See e.g. Emp. fr. 128; Pl. *Plt.* 269a-274d, the myth of the 'Age of Cronus'; Max. Tyr. 4.2–3; 5; cf. Plut. *de Pyth. orac.* 406b–407f: mankind in ancient times was more full of poetry, prophecy and divinely inspired visions than their modern counterparts, who thus began writing in prose, previously unknown. Cf. Heath 2013, 118–124.

51 See Strange 2007, 99.

52 This applies to Plotinus and Porphyry; in later Platonists the term can be applied to quite contemporary authorities, as, for example, to Iamblichus by Proclus (see Strange 2007, 98–100), as long as these authorities meet the requirements of canonisation discussed below.

post-Hellenistic philosophy, one more or less equivalent to our 'Classical' and another a more vague and authoritative reference to a tradition embodying the truth.[53] This term and its cognates became, by Plotinus' time, a standard reference point charged with an air of established authority which might partake of the divine.[54] Already in the Middle Platonists we find Plato depicted as an interpreter of the ancients.[55]

This term is usually used to refer to philosophers of the Classical period. However, the concept of ancient, privileged founders is not limited to the Ancients; a number of terms, notably 'the sages' (οἱ σοφοί), 'those of long ago' (οἱ πάλαι), 'the theologians' (οἱ θεολόγοι) and cognate appellations, refer to a tradition of wisdom different from, and pre-dating, philosophy. In fact, the Middle Platonists made a concerted move toward including a broad range of pre-philosophic sources of wisdom in their canon, which allowed them both to exploit the cultural prestige of the Classical past and to 'perennialise' their tradition fully, extending it back into an undefined past without a determinate beginning.[56] The Platonist sages may include Homer,[57] Hesiod[58] and Orpheus,[59] understood as inspired sages who hid

[53] Boys-Stones 2001, 147 n. 31.

[54] Charrue 1978, 23–27. Armstrong (1990c, 418–19) and Sedley (1989, 101 ff.) give useful discussions of the general background of classicism and respect for 'the ancients' in Græco–Roman culture which underlay this way of thinking.

[55] References are made to Plato's handing down ancient doctrines (e.g. Plut. *de Is.* 60.375d) which are not dissimilar in form to references to ancient *logoi* found in Plato's dialogues (see p. 72). In Celsus Plato is explicitly no innovator, but a defender of received doctrine (Orig. Cels. VI.10; see discussion at Frede 1994, 5198), while in Numenius he is specifically a follower of Pythagoras (as mentioned p. 75, and discussed further below).

[56] For a philosopher such as Plotinus, of course, the world has no beginning (see Chapter 6, n. 12), and there is thus no *a priori* reason to think that his idea of tradition is not literally perennial.

[57] On Late Platonist readings of Homer as a source of philosophic wisdom, see Lamberton 1989; Heath 2013, 138–179. We have referred to Maximus of Tyre (n. 45); the manuscript title of Maximus' oration, Εἰ ἔστιν καθ' Ὅμηρον αἵρεσις, *On Whether there is a Homeric Philosophic School*, indicates Maximus' approach, conflating the poetic and philosophic enterprises; cf. Oration 4, *Who Has Given a Better Account of the Gods, Poets or Philosophers?* 1, where the two enterprises are identified as one. We know of a lost *On Homer's Philosophy* by Favorinus (see Trapp 1997, 214) whose title promises a similar approach; we also know of a lost *On the Philosophy of Homer* by Porphyry and a lost treatise by Longinus investigating whether or not Homer was a philosopher (Lamberton 1989, 111). Celsus also indicates that Homer knew the True Doctrine (Orig. *Cels.* 1.16 with VI.42); see further citations at Boys-Stones 2001, 119 n. 40. Num. fr. 35 11–14 cites Homer as an authority for a cosmological doctrine; cf. Plut. *de Is.* 51.371e3-8. Porphyry's *de antro nympharum* (on which see Lamberton 1989, 108–33; Struck 2004, 71–5) provides a surviving extensive example of this type of commentary, and also makes clear, from its citations, that it is part of a much older tradition of philosophical exegesis.

[58] Celsus (*ap*. Orig. *Cels.* IV.36) refers to 'Hesiod and thousands of other inspired men'. *Ennead* IV.8[31]1.21 seemingly conflates Hes. *Op*. 60–89 and *Theog*. 521, giving the myth of the primordial creation of woman and reading it as containing an esoteric Platonist doctrine of matter.

[59] Orpheus became especially prominent among later Platonists; he does not make an appearance in the *Enneads*, except indirectly through Plotinus' retelling of the Orphic 'mirror of Dionysus' story (IV.3[27]12.26); Plotinus interpretats this myth as a philosophical enigma (see further below).

their knowledge beneath a fictional screen of apparent absurdities. These poets are commonly known as 'theological' poets (θεολόγοι),[60] and 'the Theologian' (ὁ θεολόγος) became Orpheus' unofficial title.[61]

Plutarch's use of mystery cults as loci for the unearthing of esoteric philosophic wisdom has been highlighted in recent scholarship.[62] Numenius refers to the rites of barbarian peoples in terms of an esoteric philosophic content, similarly understood.[63] In these examples the assumption is that there were certain ancient sages, often referred to as *sophoi* and *theologoi*, who intentionally founded the mysteries and fabricated the mythological stories of antiquity to convey philosophic truths hidden from the masses. Like the idea of an immemorial wisdom, this assumption can probably be traced to Stoic thought:[64] the Stoic Cornutus (first century CE) is the earliest surviving writer who discusses programmatically the ways in which truths were hidden within myths by their primordial founders, who had a clearer view of truth precisely because they were ancient.[65] It is found transformed in Platonist writings: we find it in Numenius,[66] Celsus,[67] Maximus of Tyre[68] and Plutarch (discussed presently). The Platonist *theologoi* and *sophoi* mirror the structure of the old Greek *topos* of the nomothete, the founder figure who gave laws and identity

[60] The fullest discussion of the early Greek poets as *theologoi* is Lamberton 1989, 22–31, where it is made clear that this was a common appellation from the fifth century BCE onward. Aristotle's reference to οἱ περὶ Ἡσίοδον καὶ πάντες ὅσοι θεολόγοι (*Metaph*. B 1000a9, noted by Lamberton 1989, 23–24) may serve as a representative occurrence. Sextus Empiricus' attacks on the authority of theological poets (S.E. *M*. I.279-98; IX.192) are instructive as to the degree to which these authors were incorporated into philosophic discourse by the end of the second century CE, so as to require refutation by the philosophically serious Sextus. The sixth-century CE anonymous *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* begins its historical survey of philosophic *hæreses* with 'the poetic school', whose leaders were Orpheus, Homer, Musæus and Hesiod (7.2–6 Westerink, noted by Heath 2013, 137).

[61] Linforth 1973, 189; Lamberton 1989, 22, 27, 28; Lamberton 1995, 150. E.g. Procl. *In. Tim*. III p. 161, 3 Diehl: ἅπασα γὰρ ἡ παρ' Ἕλλησι θεολογία τῆς Ὀρφικῆς ἐστι μυσταγωγίας ἔκγονος, πρώτου μὲν Πυθαγόρου παρὰ Ἀγλαοφήμου τὰ περὶ θεῶν ὄργια διδαχθέντος, δευτέρου δὲ Πλάτωνος ὑποδεξαμένου τὴν παντελῆ περὶ τούτων ἐπιστήμεην ἔκ τε τῶν Πυθαγορείων καὶ τῶν Ὀρφικῶν γραμμάτων. The idea of Orpheus having founded sacred rituals can be traced back at least to Aristophanes' *Frogs*, where the character of Æschylus expounds on the benefits brought to mankind by the ancient poets (1032–1036), and has Orpheus teaching τελετάς to the Greeks.

[62] See p. 108 ff.

[63] Fr. 1a.

[64] As Boys-Stones 2001, 18–24.

[65] See Boys-Stones 2001, 56–59; Struck 2004, 149–151. The key passage is Cap. 17 of Cornutus' *Compendium*.

[66] See Numen. fr. 37 l. 13, transmitted by Proclus: οἱ παλαιοί … θεολόγοι. Van Nuffelen argues that a belief in ancient theologians and sages lie behind scattered references in Numenius (van Nuffelen 2011, 82–83).

[67] Or. *Cels*. VI.42.29-30 = Pherecyd. Syr. fr. B4 DK.

[68] E.g. Oration 4.3.60–3 *et passim*.

to a city-state or people,[69] but the Platonist theologians are more elevated and authoritative from a post-Hellenistic perspective, having for their purview not the framing of laws and a virtuous polity, but universal concerns of theology, the highest division of philosophy in Platonist eyes.

Plutarch's numerous scattered references to ancient theologians and lawgivers in *On Isis and Osiris* have been studied by van Nuffelen; the basic idea which emerges from this study is one of ancient founders who formed rites and myths with a view to concealing their true meanings from the superstitious and those incapable of higher philosophic understanding.[70] Their wisdom is thus an esoteric wisdom, and in need of philosophic hermeneutics to uncover it.[71] Plutarch's approach may be summed up by a close reading of the following passage from that work:

> This [a passage from Euripides] explains a very ancient doctrine which comes down to poets and philosophers from theologians and lawgivers – anonymous in origin, but with a strong verisimilitude that is difficult to deny – preserved not only in oracles and auguries, but also in the mystery initiations and ritual offerings of barbarians and Hellenes everywhere, [stating] that the universe is not abandoned to itself, pilotless, without intellect or reason, nor does a single *logos* rule and direct it as with a tiller or with reins that bring obedience, but rather [there are] many things composed of a mixture of good and bad . . .[72]

We note the order of transmission of this ancient doctrine, starting from ancient founder figures and then to poets and philosophers, who are thus second in line and placed in this context on an equal footing as inheritors

[69] E.g. Plut. *de Is.* 1.351c; 2.351e; 11.355d–e. The figure of philosopher as literal nomothete is not unknown: Pythagoras is held by some sources as having given laws to the Italian Greeks (e.g. D.L. 8.1.3) and to have trained other nomothetes (*ibid.* 8.1.16), and Parmenides is reported to have founded laws for Elea (D.L. 9.3.23, citing Speusippus' *On Philosophy*). Iamblichus (*VP* 30.172-3) makes Pythagoras the Ur-nomothete: having established the type of wisdom known as 'lawgiving' (νομοθετικόν), Pythagoras trained a long list of lawgivers who then went out and founded city-constitutions across the Greek world. The nomothete as philosopher also appears: Diogenes Laërtius discusses Solon, the lawgiver of the Athenians, alongside Thales and other early philosophers.

[70] van Nuffelen 2011, 67–71; cf. Froidefond 1988, 78–80. See also *de E Delphico* 9 = 388f: κρυπτόμενοι δὲ τοὺς πολλοὺς οἱ σοφώτεροι κτλ. The earlier context (388e) makes it clear that these very wise men are poet-theologians. At *de Pyth. orac.* 407e the philosophic secrets in oracles are hidden, not from the unlettered masses, but from tyrants, so as to protect the people from the potential abuse of power such knowledge would give them. The implication, again, is that the philosophers who are able to decode the oracular truths are immune from corrupt misuse of it. See Stroumsa 1996b, 274.

[71] van Nuffelen 2011, 63–5; cf. Heath 2013, 118–125. Cf. Frede 1994, 5197 with regard to Celsus. See p. 119 on Philo, and further below on Numenius.

[72] 369b-c. On this passage cf. van Nuffelen 2011, 61–65.

of the ancient wisdom.[73] We note, too, that the actual words of the gods themselves – in the form of auguries and oracles – are adduced to the tradition as well. In a fascinating hermeneutic move, Plutarch elsewhere tells us that the traditional obscurity of oracles is due to the gods' wish to keep theological knowledge out of the hands of those unsuited to know it. The gods themselves are esotericists, and to be interpreted according to the same principles of esoteric reading as the sages.

Plutarch is discrediting here what he takes to be Epicurean and Democritan doctrine on the one hand, and Stoic doctrine on the other,[74] using the ancient account (which happens here to be identical to Plutarch's particular dualistic view of Platonic cosmology) as proof of this refutation. This passage thus provides a very clear example of the way in which the argument from authority in Platonist writing could be given the imprimatur of anonymous ancients whose very anonymity makes them irrefutable; the anonymity insisted upon by Plutarch, presented as though it were a possible objection, is in fact a rhetorical strength.[75] In a similar way, the esoteric nature of the doctrine in question, hidden as it is within rites and oracles (the latter a notoriously obscure medium of information) adds to the effective authority of the pronouncement by removing the possibility of refutation.[76] The Stoics and Epicureans, whose doctrines lie in plain sight, are helpless before the all-pervasive, but hidden, wisdom of the ancients, whose latent ubiquity in culture itself makes them irrefutable.[77]

Platonist Orientalism

The mention of barbarian rites in this passage from Plutarch brings us to the next important theme of Platonist perennialism, the notion of a primordial barbarian wisdom, which in a Platonist context may be seen as part of a more broad 'Platonist orientalism', a general fascination with exotic peoples found in Plato and the Platonists.[78] This theme, whereby a shifting group of 'wise barbarians' (most commonly a selection from

[73] Cf. *ibid.* 25.360d.

[74] Both of these schools are mentioned explicitly at 369a. Plutarch treats the Epicureans and Democritus as belonging to a single atomist school of thought.

[75] Cf. *ibid.* 64; 70.378: the origin of the true wisdom is lost in immemorial antiquity, and can be claimed by no one.

[76] See van Nuffelen 2007 for a discussion of Plutarch's use of the philosophic silence (as I define it) as a trump-card in dialectic; see further, p. 108.

[77] On the ubiquity of the true wisdom, see further Plut. *de Is.* 67–68.377f-378a.

[78] Coined, as 'Platonic orientalism', by Walbridge 2001 with reference to the work of the 11th–12th century Sufi Abu al-Najib al-Suhrawardi; the relevance of this category to ancient Platonism bears witness to the persistent character of this trope in Platonist thought. Edward Said's modern conceptions of 'Orientalism' and 'the Orient' are helpful in this context; see Said 2003, 1–9; 12; 15.

the Egyptians, Magians, Chaldæans and Indian Brahmans, and sometimes also such relative newcomers as the Jews) possessed a wisdom from which the Greeks learned some aspects of the 'true account', had a very long history in Greek thought,[79] and Plato himself provides some of its formative loci in the dialogues.[80] The wise barbarians provide a powerful and much-used referent for Platonist authors situating the origins of philosophic truth in the distant past or in the current, but exotically authoritative, traditions of these privileged peoples.[81] Platonists of the first centuries CE made eclectic use of a large pseudepigraphic literature attributed to such ancient barbarian sages as Zoroaster and Ostanes[82] and the adepts of the Egyptian temple-cult;[83] we might also include Moses in this category.[84]

More contemporary philosophers of a certain type, such as Apollonius of Tyana, could be portrayed as modern-day barbarian sages, partaking of the same hallowed sources of wisdom as the ancients by virtue of their exotic origins,[85] just as thoroughly Hellenic and Platonist works such as the *Chaldæan Oracles* could profit from the aura of theological wisdom granted by their sobriquet.[86] The Græco-Egyptian religious texts known

[79] See Festugière 1981, I, 19–44; Hanegraaff 2012, 12–17. Heinrichs 2003, n. 10, pp. 238–239 offers a long list of Greek primary sources for ancient oriental sages; van Nuffelen 2011, 27, n. 1 gives a short bibliography of the extensive modern scholarship on the subject.

[80] E.g. *Ti.* 22d-e; *Phdr.* 274c-275b; *R.* X (the 'Myth of Er'); *Phlb.* 18b–d; *Plt.* 290de; *Epin*. 986E, 987B, 987D–988A; *Alc.*1 121E-122A. See Boys-Stones 2001, 26–7 n. 37; Hornung 2001, 20–1 on Plato's valorisation of the Egyptians.

[81] E.g. Celsus ap. Orig. *Cels.* 1.14: the ἀρχαῖος λόγος handed down by the Egyptians, Assyrians, Indians and Eleusinians (!), among others; Plut. fr. 157.16–25 Sandbach = Euseb. *PE.* 3.1.1.83c: παλαιὰ φυσιολογία transmitted in enigmas in the Orphic poems and the accounts given by the Phrygians and Egyptians.; Num. fr. 1a: τὰ ἔθνη τὰ εὐδοκιμοῦντα, 'the most reputable races'; cf. fr. 9.

[82] See Bidez and Cumont 1938; Stausberg 1998 provides a compendious history of the figure of Zoroaster in the Western imagination.

[83] The reputation of the Egyptian temple-cult for esoteric wisdom was international and lasting in antiquity: Fowden 1986, 14–15. See Heinrichs 2003, 225–6 n. 60 for an extensive list of ancient works of 'Egyptian' wisdom. Diodorus Siculus (I. 96–98) quotes Hecatæus of Abdera (4th c. BCE) on how Orpheus, Homer, Lycurgus, Solon, Democritus, Pythagoras and Plato, among others, all acquired their wisdom in Egypt.

[84] Moses is treated as a sage by Numenius (frr. 1 a–c) and later by Porphyry (see fragments listed at Boys-Stones 2001, 113), and of course by Philo (see p. 119).

[85] Philostratus' Apollonius is depicted as an amazing combination of barbarian sage (e.g. III 41; IV 19) and the purest Hellenic philosopher. Born and educated in Cappadocia, he miraculously speaks a pure Attic Greek (I 7), and spreads everywhere the praises of the ancient Hellenic ways, even rebuking the Athenians (IV 21–22) and Spartans (IV 27) for having left the path of their Classical ancestors. Cf. II 40; IV 5, where even *Romans* are considered barbarians by the Hellenising Apollonius.

[86] How old late antique philosophers considered the Oracles to be cannot be uniformly determined, nor is the authorship of 'Julian the Chaldæan' (*pere* or *fils*) uniformly attested in antiquity (see Des Places 2003, 7; Majercik 1989, 1–2), but the emperor Julian's indignant defence of the

as the *Hermetica* feature occasional touches of Egyptian 'local colour' that evoke the *gravitas* of ancient Egyptian wisdom and the theological authority of the temple-cult.[87] In all of this, there is little evidence of reliance on, or access to, primary 'oriental' sources, but copious evidence of a large body of Græco–Roman orientalist texts on which philosophers drew.[88] This is not, of course, to say that Greek culture somehow remained 'pure' in cohabitation with other groups – there are identifiably Egyptian elements in the *Hermetica*, for example[89] – but rather that the narrative of distinct Hellenic and barbarian cultures was a constant in antiquity.

This orientalism had laudatory and defamatory facets. Eastern barbarian wisdom had, on the one hand, a wide reputation as being especially potent in the realm of theology and divine worship;[90] contrariwise, these same barbarians were widely seen as adepts in illegal and unphilosophical magical practices.[91] The definition of μαγεύειν in Hesychius' lexicon (*s.v.*) as 'Sorcery; cultivation of the gods' (γοητεύειν· θεραπεύειν θεούς) instructively juxtaposes both ideas.[92] The tensions between Hellenic chauvinism, whereby all non-Greeks – even Romans – might be scorned as barbarians, and Platonist orientalism, whereby the Greeks were all children compared to the Egyptians, powered complex ideological dynamics out of which ideas of the perennial wisdom grew in late antiquity.

Chaldæans as a 'sacred and theurgic race' (Jul. *Gal.* 354b) shows the degree of respect that a Platonist might accord to Chaldæans *qua* Chaldæans in a context of theological or ritual matters, whether or not the Chaldæans in question are truly ancient. See further n. 90.

87 E.g. *CH* XVI 1; *Ascl.* 24 *et passim.*

88 Millar's comments on Porphyry's orientalism (1997, 256–259) are relevant to Platonism as a whole. See Richter 2001.

89 See Fowden 1986, 45–74.

90 'Pl.' *Alc. 1* 122A 2: the *mageia* of the Persian Magians defined as θεῶν θεραπεία; cf. Amm. Marc. XXIII.32: *Magiam opinionum insignium auctor amplissimus Plato, hagistiam* [*sc.* ἁγιστείαν] *esse verbo mystico docet, divinorum incorruptissimum cultum*; see ibid. 33; Ph. *quod om.* 74: the Magi as natural scientists and scholars of divine secrets; cf. Porph. *abst.* 4.16; Porph. *philos. ex orac.* = Euseb. *PE* 4.10.1-4: Egyptians, Phoenicians, Chaldæans, Lydians, Hebrews (contrasted with the Greeks, who have strayed from the path of the gods); Iamb. *de myst.* I.1, 2; VII.7; IX.4; the Assyrians and Egyptians are ἱερῶν ἐθνῶν whose language is innately suitable for invoking the gods.

91 See Bidez and Cumont 1938, 144–5; Said 2003, 56–58.

92 Cf. D.Chr. *Or.* 36.41; 49.7. Cf. Philostr. *V.A.* 1.2, where Apollonius is accused of being a μάγος because of his association with Brahmans and Egyptians; here μάγος is clearly understood to mean 'sorcerer'. On the history and development of the terms μαγεία/*magia*, see Graf 1997, 2–6; Janowitz 2001, 9–13.

These ideological currents deserve much further study, especially as regards philosophy. The claims, counter-claims and polemics become very complicated, as one might expect in as ethnically diverse and ethnocentric a milieu as the Roman empire.[93] 'Barbarian' writers might argue that their wisdom had roots among the same wise barbarians revered by Hellenic authorities,[94] or argue that their nation had a superior connection to the ancient wisdom than the Hellenes;[95] 'barbarian' philosophers might also argue that their own thought was in fact Hellenic, and Hellenic authors claim 'barbarian' institutions for their own, effectively Hellenising them.[96] We can only generalise here that ethnic identification could be and often was part and parcel of philosophic self-identification in the post-Hellenistic and beyond, and note that Platonist authors very often trace their doctrines to wise barbarians,[97] sometimes asserting that Plato himself learned at their feet,[98] and that this identification with barbarian wisdom functioned as a source of support for Platonist ideas, importing a mystique both of antiquity and of strong authority.

[93] In characterising the Empire in this way, the modern concept of 'race' is not intended; rather, the more culturally and linguistically based ideas of *ethnos* and *gens* prevailing at the time.

[94] E.g. Josephus *Ap.* I.22, 179: the Jews' philosophy descended from the ancient Indian wisdom. Cf. Philo of Alexandria, *quod om.* 73–74, who makes a synoptic survey of the sages of various nations, listing the traditional seven sages of Greece, the Persian Magi (who are depicted as natural scientists and theologians with a secret wisdom), the Indian gymnosophists and (75a1) the Jewish Essenes, whose pious excellence is extolled at length, and clearly meant to be contextualised alongside the authorities alluded to earlier.

[95] Struck argues (2002, 395–396) that Iamb. *de myst.* VII.5, where Iamblichus describes the Greeks as by nature flighty and enamoured of novelty, while the Assyrians are 'constant in their ways' and hence true to 'the ancients', is an attempt by the philosopher to boost his own cultural prestige (as a native Syriac-speaker) by assimilation to the ancient and respected Assyrians. It is however uncertain that Iamblichus did speak Syriac (see apposite remarks on another 'Syrian' philosopher, Porphyry, at Millar 1997). We might theorise something similar behind Numenius' (from Apamea in Coele Syria) disparagement of the Greeks as a 'young' race; cf. Athanassiadi 2006, 94.

[96] Julian, in his attack on the Christians (*Gal.* 354b), notes that he does revere the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, because they were 'Chaldæans of a sacred and theurgic race'; this polemical piece as a whole illustrates the way in which foreign elements may be brought within the Hellenic fold *via* Platonist orientalism. Cf. Athanassiadi-Fowden 1981, 123–124; 134; 141. Cf. Philostratus' Apollonius of Tyana, who is simultaneously a wise barbarian and the most purely Attic of philosophers (see n. 85).

[97] See further p. 110 ff.

[98] E.g. Apul. *Plat.* 186; Plut. *de Is.* 10.354d–e; further citations at Boys-Stones 2001, 116–118, with 117 n. 34. Cicero proves that this belief existed before Platonism: in *Rep.* I.10, the character of Scipio, discussing Plato's peregrinations after Socrates' death, has him travelling to Egypt to study, and then to Italy to investigate the discoveries of Pythagoras with Pythagoreans there. As Morrison (1958) points out, it is by no means impossible that Plato did make these journeys, but they are no less tropological for that.

The Pythagorean Mystique

A third important trope in Platonist perennialism is the prominence given to Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans. It was a common observation from Aristotle onward that Plato's thought was connected to that of Pythagoras, a connection which meant different things to different people;[99] in Platonism it came to mean, in essence, that Pythagoras was Plato's predecessor in the true philosophical *hairesis*. If a master-lineage common to all Platonists were to be constructed, it would for the most part include Pythagoras as a philosophic predecessor in the same lineage as Plato,[100] often with reference to the period when Plato is reputed to have studied in Magna Græcia with the Pythagoreans there,[101] and sometimes make Plato a 'Pythagorean'.[102]

In late antiquity reverence for Pythagoras became exceptionally sharp among Platonists; Iamblichus' *On the Pythagorean Life* and Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras* are examples of the hagiographical way in which Pythagoras and his students were envisioned by Late Platonists as philosophers *par excellence* and as Late Platonists *avant la lettre*.[103] Pythagoras is often seen, and not only by the Late Platonists, as having studied at the feet of oriental sages, usually those of the Egyptians and Magians, and thus provides a bridge between the 'oriental wisdom' and the Greek tradition.[104]

99 E.g. Arist. *Metaph.* I, 987a 29–31, where Plato's philosophic system combines his original insights with those of the 'Italic' school; cf. e.g. Aët. 2.6.6.; Cic. *Rep.* I.16, *Fin.* V.87; Num. fr. 24 ll. 46–48.

100 See citations at Boys-Stones 2001, 117, n. 33, to which may be added Num. fr. 24 56–57. Cf. Armstrong 1990c, 418; Kingsley 1995, 305.

101 Apul. *Plat.* 186.

102 Numenius says, not only that Plato 'Pythagorised', but that Socrates received his wisdom from a Pythagorean source (fr. 24, 46–48, cited p. 75), and that Plato, once removed from all the polemics of different schools who have tried to claim him, reveals his true colours as a 'Pythagorean' (*ibid.* ll. 53–57). Nicomachus of Gerasa seems to have equated the Platonist and Pythagorean schools (Nicom. *Ar.* I.1; XIII; cf. O'Meara 1989, 16). An anonymous *Life of Pythagoras* summarised by Photius (*Bibl.* 249 438b 17 ff.) makes Plato the ninth successor to Pythagoras and Aristotle the tenth. This type of lineage can take on an ambivalent or even negative tone vis à vis Plato: Numenius (fr. 24 ll. 14–18) tells us that Plato is 'not superior to the great Pythagoras, nor yet perhaps inferior'. Moderatus of Gades (if it is he; see O'Meara 1989, 11, with n. 8; cf. Burkert 1972, 95) claims that Plato, Aristotle and the Old Academy bastardised the teachings of the Pythagoreans and stole their best doctrines from the same source (*ap.* Porph. *V.P.* 53), a claim which goes back at least to Aristoxenus (also cited by Porphyry *ibid.*). On Plato's rather widespread reputation as a plagiarist in antiquity, see Chroust 1961, esp. 225–227.

103 Cf. O'Meara 1989, 35–40.

104 See generally O'Meara 1989, 26; Boys-Stones 2001, 118; See Festugière 1981, 1, 24 for a collection of antique sources linking Pythagoras with the Egyptians. Isocrates (*Busiris* 28) says that Pythagoras obtained all his wisdom from the philosophy of the Egyptians and was the first to bring philosophy to Greece; cf. Plut. *de Is.* 10.354e-f; Cic. *Fin.* 5.87; Philostr. *V.A.* VI.11; Iamb. *V.P.* 12, 14, 18. Plutarch also has Pythagoras studying under Zaratas, a common variant of Zoroaster (*On the Birth of the*

Pythagoras (and sometimes his near-contemporary Pherecydes of Syros)[105] seems to serve as the historical crossover point between the sages and the philosophers; he is often treated as a sage or *theologos*, but is also often seen as the founder of philosophy and is the earliest philosopher ascribed to the perennial tradition.[106] Plato himself probably refers to Pythagorean doctrines in the rhetorical mode of ancient wisdom. In the *Gorgias* (507d-508b) Socrates, arguing with Callicles about the good life, makes reference to ideas of universal order and geometric proportion which seem a clear reference to the Pythagoreans, putting them in the mouths of *sophoi* (507e6); Socrates' visionary account of the 'higher world' in the *Phædo* (107d-114c), about which he says mysteriously, 'someone persuaded me of it' (108c10), may be a similar reference to Pythagorean doctrines.[107]

The Transposition of Religion in Middle Platonism

The final key aspect of Platonist perennialism is the most complex, namely the incorporation, or transposition, of the religious sphere into philosophy, or, speaking more properly, an increasing mutual interplay between the religious and philosophic spheres in Platonist philosophy. This is not to deny the differences between religion and philosophy; with due regard for the anachronism of the term 'religion', which has no precise Greek equivalent,[108] we can say that the Platonists were keenly aware of the difference between philosophy and religion. Indeed, they were often keen to

Soul in Timaeus 1012e3-5; cf. Apul. *Fl.* 15); see Anastos 1948, 282–284 for many ancient attestations of Zoroaster, Pythagoras and Plato and their interrelations.

[105] Pherecydes and Pythagoras were closely linked in the ancient mind, as appears from a number of sources (see Delatte 1922, 150; Schibli 1990, 6, who speaks of their ancient 'interchangeability'), some of which make Pherecydes a teacher of Pythagoras (see Schibli 1990, 11, n. 24 for a list of sources). Celsus recounts a myth of the Titanomachy from Pherecydes which is interpreted as concealing wisdom 'bearing on both the mysteries of the Titans and the Giants … and on the [stories] of Typhon and Horus and Osiris among the Egyptians' (ap. Orig. *Cels.* VI.42.29–31). Whether it is Celsus or Pherecydes who did the interpretation is unclear, but this type of mythical discourse is typical of the *theologos*. Celsus describes Pherecydes as 'much more ancient than Heraclitus' (*ibid.* 22–23), which would also tend to place him in the theological, rather than philosophical, time-frame.

[106] Pythagoras appears as a lawgiver, typical function of the sage, in Porphyry (*V.P.* 20–22). In Iamblichus' account he studies under Bias of Priene, one of the traditional Seven Sages of Greece (*V.P.* 11), but is the first to call himself 'philosopher', having lived on into 'later times' (presumably the beginning of the era of philosophy proper: *ibid.* 12.58) and also the first to name the discipline of 'philosophy' (*ibid.* 29.159). On the history of the idea that Pythagoras was the first to call himself 'philosopher', see Burkert 1960.

[107] Kingsley 1995, 88–95.

[108] See apposite remarks at Cherlonneix 1992, 405–408.

articulate this difference, with a philosophic agenda;[109] as we shall see in the following chapter, a lack of philosophic methodology is one of Plotinus' criticisms of the Gnostics whom he attacks in Treatise 33. It is rather to note the expansion of the scope of philosophy increasingly to encompass areas, such as myth, initiation and ritual practice, hitherto seen as belonging to a separate domain.

This subject, while fitting naturally with the themes of esoteric perennialism under discussion, is important enough to merit a separate section of its own. Platonist use of mystic terminology and ideas, and the philosophical transformation of the mysteries in the post-Hellenistic period, are of great importance for understanding Plotinus' practice of philosophic silence. Plotinus makes extensive use of themes of purification, initiation and, of course, silence, drawn from the cultural and literary heritage of mystic tradition in the Hellenic world, and more specifically from the Platonist tradition. But for a true appreciation of the weight these themes have for his literary practice of hiding and revealing we should avoid a reductionist approach to the indeterminacy of register which these invocations of mystery create.

The term ἄρρητος can serve as an example of the danger of reductionism in this context. Originally pertaining to a cultic milieu, this term was transformed in Platonist discourse, coming to refer to ineffability in an absolute sense; but this is not to say that it ever lost its original cultural associations for a cultured Platonist reading public, or that to invoke the ἄρρητον was ever to invoke *only* ineffability without also invoking ideas of sacred obligation, initiated secrecy and the punishments indissolubly connected with the act of revealing the secret.

There remains always an irreducible element of indeterminacy in Platonist uses of religious registers and themes: 'l'arcane des philosophes s'enracine dans la pratique religieuse'.[110] Some of the most powerful

[109] While the philosophers discussed in the present section all incorporate religious elements into their philosophy, they do not see the two realms as coterminous. Plutarch is vocal about the difference between philosophically acceptable religion and superstition (*de Is.* 352b; 353e; 355e; see van Nuffelen 2011, 65–71). Numenius shows a critical approach to his use of religious institutions as philosophic materials (fr. 1a, and see below). Frede argues that Celsus, too, distinguishes between philosophy and religion, while privileging both as transmitters of the True Account (Frede 1994, 5197–5198). A distinction between 'philosophical' and 'hieratic' Platonists survives from late antiquity, the latter type privileging ritual action as key to philosophic attainment (*Suda* I.159: ἱερατικὴ καὶ φιλοσοφία οὐκ ἀπὸ τῶν αὐτῶν ἄρχονται ἀρχῶν. Damasc. *In Phd.* 123, 113 ff. makes it clear that both parties in this distinction are what we would call philosophers: Porphyry and Plotinus prefer philosophy, while Iamblichus Syrianus and Proclus are *hieratikoi* who prefer *hieratikê*). The debate between Iamblichus' *de mysteriis* and Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* may be read as a dialogue between the two approaches to philosophy. See Majercik 1989, 36.

[110] Pépin 1984, 24.

passages in the dialogues are Plato's evocations of mystery initiation, and from Plato onward it is not uncommon to find philosophers of different schools equating their practice with initiation.[111] It is well-known that in the Middle Platonists we find this equation developed to a thorough and elaborate extent, and that in Late Platonism it is a standard *topos*. This section will survey the evidence, firstly for Middle Platonist equation of philosophy and mystery, and secondly for Middle Platonist readings of mystery and myth as concealed philosophic text. Taken together, these two sets of evidence militate against a reading which presents these developments as mere window-dressing to more serious philosophic concerns. While not yet showing the sacralised approach to Platonist philosophy evinced by Iamblichus, Proclus and other post-Plotinian thinkers of the tradition, the Middle Platonist uses of mystery themes show a strong movement in that direction, and the indeterminacy of religious language often brings an element into Platonist discourse that can only be called 'sacred'.[112]

This dynamic of sacralisation had complex echoes across the notional boundary between religion and philosophy: the *Chaldæan Oracles*, a corpus of theological-philosophic verses originating in the second century CE in the broad milieu of Platonising religious currents of that time, were written in the literary form of the Classical hexameter oracle, and were read as oracles by Late Platonists.[113] As will appear below, Late Platonists would refer to the widely disseminated *Oracles* as 'mysteries'; they were a published *locus* of philosophic silence.

No esoteric hermeneutic was needed in order to find Platonist metaphysical ideas in the *Oracles* – they clearly originate from a source or sources well-versed in Middle Platonist theory[114] – and the Late Platonists were able to find in them a 'scripture' of sorts with which they countered the revelatory claims of their competitors, the ambitious Christian theologians of the third century and onward.[115] Proclus, arguing for the antiquity of the doctrine of the One as first principle, cites the *Oracles* as *ipsissima verba* of the gods: 'Not only Plato, but the gods themselves called

[111] E.g. Chrysippus *SVF* II.1008: philosophic discourses about the gods are τελεταί; Sen. *Ep. ad Lucil.* 90, 98: *Haec eius initiamenta sunt*; Heraclit. (Stoicus) Cap. 3. As discussed in the previous chapter, philosophers earlier than Plato, notably Pythagoras, Parmenides and Empedocles, also had strong links with mystery; in these authors, however, we are not faced with philosophy as an established genre defining its relationship with another cultural institution, but with new forms of discourse arising in part *from* a concern with giving accounts of the mysteries and their meaning.

[112] Cf. Mortley 1972, 588–90; van Nuffelen 2011, 6–10.

[113] I follow the edition of Majercik (1989). On the dating and provenance of the *Oracles*, see *ibid.* 3.

[114] See *ibid.* 3.

[115] Cf. Hadot 1987, 26.

it "the One".'[116] But already in Middle Platonism the line between the *Oracles* and philosophic authors cannot be drawn absolutely: the thought of Numenius is clearly connected with that of the *Oracles*, although the nature of the connection – who influenced whom – is unclear.[117] Middle Platonist philosophy and Middle Platonising religion were connected by reciprocal webs of influence, a fact nowhere more clear than in the case of the *Oracles*, works attributed to 'sacred and theurgic' Chaldæan sages but actually reflecting Middle Platonist metaphysics, to which they added elaborate ritual practices that were later reabsorbed by Platonist philosophy as theurgy.

Philosophy as Mystery

The comparison of (Platonist) philosophy to initiation is a fairly standard trope.[118] Most famously, Theon of Smyrna elaborately compares the course of reading the Platonic dialogues as a step-by-step initiatory process, drawing on the language of the *Phædo* (69d) and *Phædrus* (250c).[119] This theme also appears in Marinus, the biographer of Proclus, whose 'mystagogy of Plato' is also based in a reading of the Platonic texts, and is to be properly prepared for by a course in the 'preliminary and lesser mysteries' of Aristotle.[120] In this Platonist *topos* we see a complete fusion of the concerns with step-by-step education found in Plato with the idea of graded initiations drawn from the mystery cults.

This approach is clearly laid out in Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris.* After a discussion of different ritual vestments used in the mysteries of Isis and Osiris, which he reads as representing the multiplicity of the world of sense and the unity of the noetic world, respectively, Plutarch explains:

> This is why Plato and Aristotle call this division of philosophy 'epoptic', since those who through reason have left behind this [realm of] opinion, mixture and diversity and spring out into the primary [realm] of the simple

[116] *In Parm.* VII 511.14–15.

[117] Majercik 1989, 1; Athanassiadi 2002, 274.

[118] See generally Pépin 1981; Pépin 1984, 29; Dillon 1982, 74–5. Graf 2003, 4–8, 19–20 gives a useful survey of modern scholarly reception of the concept of mystery initiation; the present discussion makes reference not to the historical realities of the ritual side of initiation, but to the Platonists' equation of philosophy with initiation.

[119] *Exp.* 14.18 ff.

[120] Marin. *Procl.* 13, in Edwards 2000, 76. As Lamberton notes, Proclus' own commentary on the *Republic* of Plato frequently approaches the hermeneutics of Platonic reading in terms drawing on initiatory language (1995, 146).

> and the immaterial, fully in contact with the pure truth of it (καθαρᾶς ἀληθείας), suppose that they possess the summation of philosophy, as through an initiation.[121]

Platonist philosophy, then, could be likened to initiation, through the structural parallel of a graded, sequential approach, and, like initiation, it had a final, supreme goal, in which ideas of perfection and culmination were blended with notions of the sacred and the secret.[122]

The idea of philosophy as a graded, privileged course of instruction was the normal Platonist approach, developed in part from the Platonic materials surveyed in Chapter 2.[123] We possess a Platonist curriculum from late antiquity, the anonymous *Prolegomena to the Philosophy of Plato*, which lays out a set course for reading Plato's dialogues, starting with the more basic (in Late Platonist eyes) ethical questions and culminating in the 'physics' of the *Timaeus* and the 'theology' of the *Parmenides*.[124] Many other works indicate that such an approach was the norm.[125] Porphyry was very interested in notions of step-by-step philosophic progress,[126] and his ordering of the *Enneads* is structured as a curriculum, moving as it does from 'down-to-earth' questions and culminating in the sixth *Ennead*, dealing with the One.[127]

References to a 'culmination' or final goal of philosophy abound in the Platonists, as does the denial of the possibility of its attainment for those who have not followed the proper course of education.[128] A threefold division of education into ethical, physical and metaphysical components was common,[129] the last of which we have seen Plutarch refer to as the 'epoptic',

[121] θιγόντες ὅλως τῆς περὶ αὐτὸ καθαρᾶς ἀληθείας οἷον ἐν τελετῇ τέλος ἔχειν φιλοσοφίας νομίζουσι (77.382d–e). Note the word-play on τελετῇ and τέλος, blending conceptions of 'perfection', 'consummation' present in both terms, and importing one of 'initiation' into the latter; cf. Pl. *Phdr*. 249c8–10. Καθαρᾶς ἀληθείας, in this context, is an echo of the mystery theme of purification; see p. 48.

[122] Interesting in this context are two quotations by Late Platonists of Heraclitus' famous statement that 'nature loves to hide' in an initiatory context, noted by Pépin (1984, 29 n. 53): Jul. *Orat*. VII 11.216b–e and Procl. *In R.* II p. 107, 5–14.

[123] Cf. Hadot 1979, 218–221; 1981, 56–57: Lloyd 1990, 4–5.

[124] See Clarke et al. 2003, xxiii. This text has been attributed to Olympiodorus (Rappe 2000, 4). Cf. Aulus Gellius' report that Taurus the Middle Platonist's course consisted in reading Plato in a certain order (I.9[16]9–10), and the thematic classification of the Platonic dialogues in the *Isagogê* of Alcinoüs.

[125] E.g. *Enn*. I.2[19]; Macrob. *In somn*. I, 8, 3–11 attributes his division of virtues to Plotinus; Olymp. *In Phd*. 23, 25 ff. and 45, 14 ff. See Hadot 1979, 220–222.

[126] *Abst*. I.29-30; see Hadot 1981, 57. *Sent*. 17, 32; see Rappe 2000, 17–18.

[127] See Hadot 1993, 122; De Haas 2003, 255.

[128] See Theo. Sm. *Exp*. 15, 1–5; Plut. *def. or.* 23; *quaest. conv.* 8.2; Alcin. *Didask*. 187.7. Plotinus' attack on the Gnostics is instructive in this regard; see p. 133.

[129] E.g. Plut. *de Is.* 382d; Theo. Sm. *Exp.*. p. 14 Hiller. See Hadot 1979, 218.

or initiatory, stage of learning. Philo of Alexandria's works outline a very strict system of graded privileging of knowledge, which would seem to draw on Platonic and Pythagorean themes as well as Rabbinic practices, and which is expressed in vocabulary drawing on Hellenic *mysteria*.[130] As with the later Platonists, the upper levels of Philo's schema of knowledge are self-hidden due to the ineffable nature of his god.[131]

The specific themes of silence associated with the mysteries also abound in the Middle Platonists. Plutarch evokes them often, and van Nuffelen has analysed the ways in which Plutarchian characters strengthen their dialectical position at times by appeals to initiated silence, in effect creating unanswerable arguments: an interlocutor in a Plutarchian dialogue may break off the development of a chain of argumentation with an appeal to initiated silence, which serves not to concede or suspend the debate, but typically as a kind of dialectical *coup de grâce*.[132]

Relevant here is Apuleius' *Apology*, where the author tells the jurors at his trial on charges of practising magic, 'I will not speak of those high and divine Platonic [doctrines], unfamiliar except to the most select among the pious, and unknown to all the profane.'[133] Apuleius repeatedly invokes the philosophic *arcanum*, Plato's theological doctrines, as a kind of mystic secret which he is not at liberty to discuss, thereby both laying claim to the moral high ground and avoiding answering the prosecution's questions. The appeal to mystic secrecy, then, could be used as a strategic element of debate, philosophic and otherwise.

Mystic silence also came to stand more generally for the kind of elitism discussed above, whereby the philosopher had a duty to protect the *arcana* of the higher realms of philosophic attainment from the masses. In Oration 4 Maximus of Tyre argues that poetry and philosophy are the same endeavour (1 *et passim*), except that the latter has unwisely divested the former of its enigmas, leaving contemporary philosophers in danger of being arrested for profaning the mysteries (*ibid.* 5). Much later, Proclus theorises the philosophic use of secrecy and myth as a 'screen' (παραπέτασμα) between truth and the profane;[134] for him, the relationship between philosophic secrecy and mystic initiatory silence is one of equivalence.

[130] See Casel 1919, 74–78 for a collection of testimonia.
[131] *Ibid.* 77–78.
[132] van Nuffelen 2007, 10 *et passim*.
[133] Apul. *Apol.* 12: *Mitto enim dicere alta illa et divina platonica, rarissimo cuique piorum ignara, ceterum omnibus profanis incognita*. Cf. *ibid.* 13, 55, 56, 64, 80, other examples of 'initiated silence'. 'Pious' and 'profane' are both somewhat vitiated terms of translation here; it should be emphasised that the religious virtue and exclusion being invoked here are traditional Roman concepts, lacking any Christian overtones.
[134] Lamberton 1995, 147–50, discussing Procl. *In R.* I p. 74, 12–30.

But already in Apuleius the dividing line between the self-hiding secret of the ineffable nature of god and the mystic *arcanum* is difficult to find. Discussing the nature and incommunicability of the highest principle in his *On Plato*, Apuleius paraphrases *Timaeus* 28c 3–5,[135] changing Plato's 'impossible to tell to everyone' to 'impossible to reveal to the masses' (εἰς πολλοὺς ἐκφέρειν ἀδύνατον).[136] This change imports both an increase in elite esotericism, 'the masses' (τοῦς πολλοὺς) carrying a pejorative sense absent in the original 'everyone' (πάντας),[137] and the theme of the undivulgeable secret, through the mystic technical term *ekpherein*, but in a context not of secrecy, but of ineffability. In his *Apology*, by contrast, Apuleius emphasises the secret nature of the higher realms of philosophy, which he treats as mystic secrets, citing the same Platonic passage as justification.[138] In this latter case, far from implying that Plato means to say that his god is ineffable, he implies that it might well be spoken of, but that piety forbids doing so. These two differing uses of the same Platonic material illustrate the two main sides of Platonist philosophic silence: the act of revealing an open secret, in this case an ineffable reality, and the act of hiding a 'secret', in this case a mystic/philosophic obligation. The unsayable and the ineffable begin to merge in Apuleius' text, and it is impossible to say precisely where the cultic prohibition ends and the ineffability begins.

The practice of evoking mystic silence in philosophy served as a regular means of reminding anyone who was paying attention of the existence of 'secret knowledge'. Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris* refers tantalisingly to cultic practices which, however, must be omitted in his description as they are initiatory secrets.[139] Later Platonists increasingly used the language of initiation publically to hide the truth: the Emperor Julian refers to the Chaldæan doctrine of the elevation of the soul (a reference to the openly published *Chaldæan Oracles*) as an initiatory secret;[140] Proclus alludes (*In R.* II p. 119, 5–9) to 'ceremonial words' (λόγοι ἱερατικοί) which can separate the soul from the body, but which must be kept secret for reasons of initiated silence.

The widespread use of mystic motifs in this connection, emphasising the structural parallel between the secrecy imposed upon the initiand of traditional cult and the restricted access to the higher levels of philosophic

[135] Cited p. 147.
[136] *Pl.* 1.5. This change noted by Mortley 1972, 589.
[137] As argued *ibid.*
[138] *Apol.* 68, and see citations at n. 133.
[139] E.g. 21.359c; 35364e.
[140] *Orat.* V, 172d–e.

wisdom, theorised as the privilege of the Platonist elite, served as an important tool for the acquisition of social capital by these philosophers. In Plotinus, the elite philosophic achievement would be brought to an even more exalted level through the postulation of states of being and knowing, attained through the ascent up the chain of being; these states are ineffable, and so self-hiding, but still described with the terminological resources developed by Plato and the Middle Platonists from the mysteries. As in the culture of initiation, the acquisition of the Platonist *telos*, whether inscribed upon the act of reading and study (as exemplified in the curricula of later antiquity and their 'sacralisation' by later Platonists) or upon inner states of philosophic power (such as the achievement of *noêsis*, with its claims to direct and unimpeachable truth, or ineffable union with the One), is defined by these authors as conferring a special status.

Mystery as Philosophy

The Platonists not only assimilated their philosophic practice to mystery initiation; they also read the mystery cults as esoteric philosophical texts. As we have seen, a key theme of Platonist perennialism was the idea of ancient founding-figures, lawgivers and theologians. There was a tendency among Platonists to look to mysteries, both Hellenic and 'barbarian', in search of Platonist wisdom hidden within their rites and ordinances, not least their practice of silence. The mysteries were 'absorbed' by Platonist philosophy and became part of the perennial wisdom as a whole.[141] Platonism subsumed certain religious practices, notably the mysteries, but also myth more generally, under the wing of philosophy, rendering it in effect an esoteric textual source which might be drawn on for philosophic truths.

Perennial Wisdom in the Mysteries

Instances of Platonists 'reading' the mysteries in this way are many. Although no examples survive of Numenius' hermeneutic in action, we have a programmatic statement from the first book of his lost *On the Good* which lays out his approach: firstly, having discussed the 'testimonies of Plato' and having gone back further and linked them to statements of Pythagoras, Numenius then proposes to discuss the initiations, teachings and rituals that such nations as the Brahmans, Jews, Magi and Egyptians have established. This is not an uncritical reading

[141] See van Nuffelen 2011, 37–45. Cf. Stroumsa 1996b, 51–52.

of the religious tradition: Numenius proposes to refer to 'such [traditions] as are in agreement with Plato'.[142] Read in a modern light, this reads almost like an admission on Numenius' part that he is constructing a tradition, but in the hermeneutic world of Middle Platonism it is a methodologically sound way of interrogating traditional sources. The wording ταῖς μαρτυρίαις ταῖς Πλάτωνος indicates Plato's place as a 'witness' to, rather than an originator of, the tradition, despite the methodology being framed in terms of agreement with Plato, and, indeed, despite Numenius' central debt to Plato as a thinker.[143] The approach is typically perennialist, both in its thematic use of Pythagoras and barbarian races and in its inscription of Plato's work into an esoteric tradition.

Celsus refers to the ancient teaching (ἀρχαῖος λόγος) handed down by the Egyptians, Assyrians, Indians and Eleusinians, which, in light of the last-mentioned group, we may safely assume to refer to mystery traditions.[144] Plutarch refers to παλαιὰ φυσιολογία (perhaps 'ancient natural science') transmitted in enigmas in the Orphic poems and the accounts given by the Phrygians and Egyptians;[145] again, philosophic wisdom is esoterically concealed in the texts and 'accounts' of ancient mystery practitioners, and again they are oriental 'barbarians'.

Plutarch's general approach to the mysteries as sources of philosophic wisdom has been analysed by van Nuffelen.[146] *On Isis and Osiris* is a good example of this kind of reading of culture; it looks not only at myths and mystic lore, but at ritual vestments, temple-architecture and the way of life of the Egyptian priests, all of which are read as transmitting esoteric meaning. In this way, the Platonist hermeneutic is applied to the cultural institution of initiatory religion in the broadest sense.

It is notable that in the surviving texts of Middle Platonism this kind of exegesis is commonly applied to 'barbarian mysteries'. The Hellenic mysteries were often seen as stemming from oriental originals,[147] and, in the stories of Greek philosophers learning at the feet of barbarian sages, it is often a case of their being initiated into their mysteries; both Pythagoras

[142] Fr. 1a. Cf. van Nuffelen 2011, 78–80.
[143] See Frede 1987, 1044–8 on Numenius' debt to Plato.
[144] Cels. ap. Orig. *Cels.* 1.14.
[145] Plut. fr. 157.16-25 Sandbach = Euseb. *PE.* 3.1.1.83c. Discussed at Boys-Stones 2001, 108. For enigma, see p. 114 ff.
[146] van Nuffelen 2011, 55–6 (more generally 55–65). Cf. Burkert 1987, 84 ff.
[147] This was by no means an empty conceit: for example, for the widespread mysteries of Demeter, including those of Eleusis, 'we can assume a common structural base stretching out beyond Greece to the Meter cult of Asia Minor' (Burkert 1983, 256).

and Plato are said to have done so.[148] We might justifiably ask whether the widespread idea of 'barbarian philosophy',[149] referred, in part at least, to non-Greek religious practices and ideas, which the Platonist perennialists read as philosophical in the same sense as they read their own myths and rites, i.e., as being founded by ancients with true knowledge, and thus containing an esoteric philosophy. This question cannot be answered here, but deserves further study with perennialism in mind as a key element of the intellectual context of Hellenic observers of oriental cultures.

Revealing the Secret

Van Nuffelen draws attention to the fact that Plutarch both emphasises the secret nature of the mysteries under discussion and reveals them in the course of his philosophical exegesis.[150] Plutarch repeatedly underlines the secrecy of the sacred rites treated in *On Isis and Osiris*,[151] but the work as a whole examines and reveals them in detail. Just as this work contains initiated silences (where Plutarch refers to a secret and refrains from saying more),[152] it likewise abounds in the acts of simultaneous hiding and revealing, as when Plutarch reveals the identity of Hades and Osiris, which the Egyptian priests, Plutarch repeatedly emphasises, are said to consider an initiated secret.[153]

We know from a passage of Macrobius' *On the Dream of Scipio* that Numenius interpreted the Eleusinian mysteries philosophically. The passage is worth quoting in full:

> Again, dreams disclosed the displeasure of the divinities to Numenius (who among philosophers is rather curious about occult matters), because while interpreting the Eleusinian rites he made them public; it seemed to him that he saw the Eleusinian goddesses themselves, standing in harlots' clothing before an open brothel. And when he marvelled at this and demanded the reasons for a disgrace not befitting divinity, they responded in anger that they had been violently dragged away from the sanctuary of their chastity and had been prostituted to all comers by Numenius himself.[154]

[148] E.g. Hecatæus of Abdera, cited n. 83 on both Pythagoras and Plato; Iamb. *V.P.* 12, 14, 18, 19 on Pythagoras.
[149] E.g. Porph. *Plot.* 3 13–19.
[150] van Nuffelen 2011, 57–58.
[151] 2.351e-352b; see discussion.
[152] See n. 139.
[153] 78.382e-f. See further examples 58.
[154] Num. fr. 55.

It is interesting to speculate on how this anecdote was transmitted to Macrobius. It may have been related by Numenius himself; in light of the play of the 'secret revealed' trope in Platonist writings, we can by no means rule out its inclusion in the very work which discussed the rites in question! If so, this dream-anecdote would serve as an example of the motif of divine punishment attendant upon breaking the mystic silence, a *topos* often found in other published sources which might themselves be seen as revealing at least some of the secret wisdom.[155] If the anecdote comes from another source, it might represent the view that Numenius had gone too far in his interpretation (either in his own judgement or in some other observer's) and passed the bounds of propriety in his interpretative revelations.

The dynamics of hiding and revealing, then, surely had limits, just as did the practice of hermeneutically interpreting religious institutions as esoteric philosophical texts; but in both cases it is difficult to reconstruct what these limits might have been. Doubtless they varied from place to place and from thinker to thinker.[156] It is however possible to gain substantial insights into the way the Platonists themselves discuss esoteric interpretation, which will go some way toward divining the boundaries of hiding and revealing in Middle Platonism.

Esoteric Hermeneutics in Middle Platonism

We have seen how the Platonists interrogated poets, myths and rituals for hidden, inner meanings, and that they saw philosophy as providing the interpretative key which rendered these meanings intelligible. We have discussed the belief that the ancient sages who had founded religious traditions had hidden these secret meanings from the masses. From the surviving literature it seems that in the eyes of the Platonists these sages had done so using a very specific type of discourse, most often termed enigma (αἴνιγμα).[157] The ancient Greeks seem generally to have laboured under the 'intentional fallacy'; that is, they believed that if something is found in a text, it must have been put there intentionally by the author.[158] An exception may be found within some strands of Stoicism: while some Stoics posited a panoply of privileged founder-figures who instituted myths and

[155] See n. 36.

[156] Cf. Lamberton 1995, 150.

[157] Important general works on enigma and esoteric interpretation among the Platonists are Pépin 1976; Lamberton 1989; Lamberton 1995; and now Struck 2004.

[158] Cf. Struck 2004, 145–151; 279–282. On the 'intentional fallacy' see in the first instance the seminal article Beardsley and Wimsatt 1946.

rituals with enigmas hidden within them (an approach which Platonism wholeheartedly embraced),[159] at least one thinker, Chrysippus, seems to have had a theory of reading whereby meaning was in some sense constructed in the act of reading itself.[160] With the exception of Plutarch, who occasionally shows a remarkably sophisticated grasp of the way in which readers construct meaning in a text,[161] there is little evidence that Platonist philosophers did not take their view of history seriously and literally. We turn now to their methods of interpreting it.

Enigma, Symbolon and Esoteric Hermeneutics

The term 'enigma' originally meant 'a riddle';[162] from this basic meaning, a number of specialised technical uses developed. It has a long history in association with oracles, whose obscure utterances supplied enigmas to be interpreted,[163] and with divination more generally.[164] Enigma was a term current in Alexandrian rhetorical science in the first centuries CE, indicating allegoresis, especially in Homer;[165] it was a trope indicating an obscure meaning in need of scholarly explication, where something in the poet's text stands for something else.[166] The term had a parallel history in philosophy. Aristotle in the *Poetics* defines enigma as a use of impossible or contradictory language to describe a fact.[167] But his comment in the *Rhetoric* that 'metaphors hint [at literal meaning]' (μεταφοραὶ γὰρ αἰνίττονται) broadens his conception: the verb αἰνίττομαι refers to a metaphorical transference of meaning across semantic spheres, not simply to riddling in its basic form.[168]

[159] Chaeremon's reading of the mysteries seems to have been one such approach (Chaeremon Test. 9 Horst = Porph. *Chr.* fr. 39 Harnack; *ibid.* fr. 12). We have discussed Cornutus' methodology on p. 96.

[160] Plut. *de aud. po.* 34b discusses with approval Chrysippus' view that a certain intertextuality might be exercised in interpretation, and that the reader might actively 'expand' the meaning of the text ἐπὶ πλέον τῶν λεγομένων (Lamberton 1989, 21, n. 54). Struck 2004, 111–141 provides a relevant discussion of Stoic linguistic and literary theory. As with his logic, Chrysippus seems with his theory of meaning to have been more than a millennium ahead of his time.

[161] See previous note.

[162] See LSJ s.v.

[163] Struck 2004, 173–177 discusses sources, the earliest of which is Aristophanes *Pax* 45–47.

[164] *Ibid*. 165–170; 174.

[165] Charrue 1978, 29. Cook 2001 provides a survey of enigma in antique rhetorical theory.

[166] Cf. Charrue 1978, 38; Eon 1970, 274. Struck 2004, 21–76 offers a thorough history of enigma as a trope in earlier Greek literature.

[167] *Po.* 22, 1458a 26: αἰνίγματός τε γὰρ ἰδέα αὕτη ἐστί, τὸ λέγοντα ὑπάρχοντα ἀδύνατα συνάψαι.

[168] *Rh.* 1405ab. Cf. Charrue 1978, 38.

The term appears in Plato, mainly indicating philosophical problems or *aporiai*, a usage not unlike the modern 'enigma: a conundrum'.[169] However, as we have seen, *Theætetus* 152c refers to an esoteric discourse rather than an *aporia* as such, and the enigma in the Second Epistle unmistakably refers to a riddling sort of discourse (see pages 66 and 68, respectively). There are further examples. A passage in the *Lysis* refers, like the *Theætetus*, to a kind of philosophic wisdom with a hidden meaning: the writings of 'the wisest of men ... who discourse and write about nature and the universe'[170] contain the axiom that 'like is friend to like' but these wisest of men 'speak esoterically' (αἰνίττονται).[171] Here the secret meaning allows Plato's Socrates to bring this axiom (probably a reference to Empedocles) into line with his own thinking. There is also a reference, in the *Phædo*, to a secret meaning encoded within the mysteries which is an enigma in need of interpretation.[172] Plato (and 'Plato'), then, uses the term 'enigma' with an extended range of meaning that includes intentionally obscure philosophic utterances and sacred traditions hiding philosophic truths within them, as well as 'riddles' to be solved.[173]

The dictionary definition of αἴνιγμα as 'dark saying, riddle', etc. (LSJ *s.v.*) misses these nuanced meanings from early Athenian philosophy. It also ignores a later widespread and very distinct use of the term: as Struck has shown, enigma was associated widely from the first century CE with a recognised type of allegorical interpretation.[174] Lastly, it misses the later development of the word in Platonist exegesis, whereby it took on a specific technical force developed from this more general tradition of allegorical reading. Enigma in this context is not primarily a riddling way of speaking, a problem in need of solution, or a form of allegoresis, but a type of esoteric text which might take the form of any of these.[175] Lamberton points out the

[169] *Chrm*. 161c–162b; *Ap*. 27a1; *R*. 1.332b12 (see Eon 1970, 274 n. 67); *R*. 332b (see Casel 1919, 38).

[170] Pl. *Ly*. 214b: τῶν σοφωτάτων ... οὗτοι οἱ περὶ φύσεώς τε καὶ τοῦ ὅλου διαλεγόμενοι καὶ γράφοντες.

[171] *Ibid*. 214d.

[172] Cited n. 138.

[173] Cf. Struck 2004, 49.

[174] Struck 2004, 142, *et passim*. To take one example, Pausanias 8.8.3 states what seems to be a non-specialist approach to this kind of interpretation.

[175] The definition proposed differs somewhat from the general scholarly approach to Platonist enigma, which tends not to separate it starkly from enigma as an ancient term of rhetoric (e.g. Lamberton 1989, 48, who defines αἰνίττομαι as 'to hint at, indicate by means of symbols'; Mortley 1973, App. II; Eon 1970, 274; Charrue 1978, 38). On ancient allegoresis, see Casel 1919, 42–48; Lamberton 1989, 20–21. In some early uses, such as the αἰνιγματώδης writing of the Orphic poet decoded by the author of the Derveni papyrus (col. VII.5), the term does seem to indicate a fairly straightforward allegorical reading, where gods stand for physical elements *(Pap. Derv.* col. xiii, xiv; cf. Seaford 1986, 21–22). While it is true that a Platonist enigma can indicate such an allegorical equivalence (as, for

ancient meaning of the term ἀλληγορία is '… broader [than the modern] and more difficult to define', and '… can comprehend virtually the whole of what we call interpretation beyond mere parsing.'[176] In what follows I argue that enigma, for the Platonists, is not primarily allegory, but of course it would fit under such a broad definition of allegory as this. The main thrust of my argument is that the concept of enigma involves a concept of esotericism; thus, I am attempting to show not so much that enigma is not comprehended by this or that definition of allegory, but that it has a specific common feature that a given instance of allegory may or may not have. In Plotinus, and, I would argue, already in Middle Platonism, enigma signifies something different and very specific.

In Platonist enigma there is a text, most often a myth, but possibly a ritual or another religious institution, with a deeper, true meaning, posited as *hidden* within that text or institution, encoded enigmatically (ἐν αἰνίγμασι or ᾐνιγμένως).[177] Enigma takes place through a mode of reading or interpretation which extracts hidden meanings from texts, but it is crucial to remember that the enigma itself is read as presupposing a notional act of hiding by the original author. Enigmatic reading implies the previous existence (or present construction, depending upon the standpoint from which one reads) of enigmatic writers or, in the case of rituals read in these terms, of enigmatic founders. Unlike 'riddling speech', whereby an author might be purposefully unclear to hide his meaning, the enigma need not advertise itself until it is explicated by the philosophic reader; it is read as being 'truly hidden' until it is brought to light, a dynamic of reading which always privileges the interpreter (and therefore his reader) as somehow worthy of disclosing what the original author meant to hide.

This chapter has investigated the likely Platonist candidates for such a methodology – ancients, theologic poets and the founders of mysteries – but a most interesting development that we find in Plotinus is the application of this term to the writings of philosophers. This approach is adumbrated in Plato, as we have seen, and in Plutarch, for whom both *logoi* and *mythoi* are susceptible to enigmatic reading.[178] As will be discussed in the following chapter, Plotinus expands these strategies to a wide-ranging

example, Plut. *de Is.* 55.373e), it more often indicates a much looser metaphorical link between signifier and signified: a ritual action may point to a doctrine of immortality, a myth may indicate a complex philosophic doctrine, or, sometimes, a straightforward doctrine may mean something other than what it seems to mean.

[176] Lamberton 1989, 20–1.21.

[177] The latter term appears at *Enneads* IV.3[27]12.26; VI.2[19]22.1.

[178] *De Is.* 9.354b–c: the Egyptian philosophy expressed truths enigmatically in both modes of discourse; see Froidefond 1988, 81–2; 90. *Ibid.* 32.365f: a Pythagorean gnomic statement enigmatically

esoteric hermeneutic: for Plotinus, Plato himself writes in enigmas, and not only in his mythologising passages.

Casel sees the key difference between Stoic allegory and Platonist reading of myth to be that the Stoics attempt to subject every element of myth to a rationalist interpretation of equivalence, and see the mythic form as a mere 'garment' for philosophic truths; the Platonists, by contrast, embrace myth as a form of discourse with an ability to convey certain truths which rational language cannot encompass.[179] There is some justice in this as regards Plato's own appreciation of myth[180] and in, for example, Plutarch,[181] but we should not let the sophisticated Platonist appreciation of *mythos* as a mode of discourse blind us to the Platonists' sometimes insensitive approach to mythic materials, quite often reading them merely as 'containers' for philosophic truths. It should also be noted that 'enigma' is sometimes seemingly used by Platonists as practically synonymous with 'myth'.[182] In short, allegory and enigma are closely related, both generally linked to readings of myth, and often spill over into each other; nevertheless, the Platonist practice of reading enigmas is characteristic enough, in general, to demand a definition which emphasises the esoteric character inherent in this mode of reading as distinguished from allegory.[183]

Quintilian's characterisation of enigma as *allegoria, quae est obscurior*[184] may point us toward a concise working definition. Noting that *obscurus* may mean not only 'obscure' but also 'closed, secret, reserved',[185] we can expand on Quintilian's comment and say that Platonist enigma, like

expresses a Plutarchan doctrine. But most often in Plutarch an enigma is a myth hiding a philosophic truth, as at e.g. *de Is.* 11.355b.

179 Casel 1919, 44–45. Cf. e.g. Plut. *de Is.* 36.365b–40.367c, where Plutarch interprets Egyptian myth firstly in elemental and astronomical terms, an approach which, he says, 'resembles the theology of the Stoics' (40.366c), and then goes on to give his own, metaphysically abstract interpretation, which he presents as a *palaios logos* expressed as an enigma.

180 See *Phdr.* 229c; *R.* 378d.

181 *de Is.* 20.358e–f.

182 Stroumsa (1996b, 271–283) argues that the terms myth and enigma were 'identified' in late antiquity, but fails to note certain occurrences, discussed below, where Platonist enigma is applied not to myth at all, but to symbolic actions, to architecture, or even, in certain Plotinian examples, to the texts of Plato's *Parmenides* and *Republic*, philosophic dialectic at its driest and least mythic.

183 On late antique theories of the relationship between allegory and enigma see Cook 2001, 258–260. As Struck points out, the term enigma often functions in ancient texts as a simple equivalent of what modern readers mean by allegory, and, the term 'allegory' actually being a later coinage – Plutarch describes the word ἀλληγορία as newfangled in his day (*de aud. po.* 19e-f; see Struck 2004, 170) – we might conjecture that ancient theories of 'allegory' were in fact new ideas about the established hermeneutic term 'enigma'.

184 *Inst.* VIII.6.52.

185 *OLD s.v.*

allegorical reading, locates truth beneath the surface of the text, but that the trope is not complete without the notional act of breaking a written silence, of unearthing a secret.[186]

We have a related, but distinct, term of esoteric discourse in the Platonist use of the term *symbolon* and its cognates. The *symbolon* had a technical meaning in the context of the mysteries and was associated with the Pythagoreans, as we have seen, and is also very often linked with Egypt, especially with the hieroglyphic writing.[187] Pythagoras is sometimes described as having learned the 'symbolic method' in Egypt from the priests there[188] (interestingly, in the Neopythagorean Philo we find the same account given of Moses).[189] Attempts have been made to differentiate the *symbolon* from the enigma in Platonist hermeneutics,[190] but in practice it seems to have functioned as a subcategory of enigma[191] especially

[186] Cf. Froidefond 1988, 90: 'l'αἴνιγμα, qui implique qu'on a délibérément chargé un rite ou un mythe d'un sens caché, différent du sens apparent.' See also the useful discussion at Stroumsa 1996a, 12–26. My understanding of Platonist enigma differs from that of Charrue (1978, 25) and Struck (2004 *passim*), who see enigma simply as a technical term for allegorical exegesis. The difference is one of emphasis; I insist that the Platonists always intend the unearthing of an enigma as an act of esoteric reading, while others, e.g. some Stoics (see n. 160), need not have.

[187] E.g. *Chaerem. Stoic.* fr. 2; Plut. *de Is.* 10.354e; cf. Plot. *Enn.* V.8[31]6.1.

[188] Plut. *de Is.* 10.354e: Pythagoras, being greatly impressed with the Egyptians and they with him, ἀπεμιμήσατο τὸ συμβολικὸν αὐτῶν καὶ μυστεριῶδες ἀναμίξας αἰνίγμασι τὰ δόγματα. Τῶν γὰρ καλουμένων γραμμάτων ἱερογλυφικῶν οὐθὲν ἀπολείπει τὰ πολλὰ τῶν Πυθαγορικῶν παραγγελμάτων, οἷον ἐστι τὸ μὴ ἐσθίειν ἐπὶ δίφρου κτλ. It is unclear exactly how Plutarch understands the connection between Pythagorean symbolic sayings and the Egyptian hieroglyphs in this passage, but he undoubtedly sees a direct link. Iamb. *V.P.* 20, quoting Apollonius of Tyana, says that Pythagoras' and the Egyptians' symbolic methods are identical; cf. Porph. *V.P.* 12.

[189] Ph. *de vita Mos.* I 23: Moses learned τὴν διὰ συμβόλων φιλοσοφίαν, ἧς ἐν τοῖς λεγομένοις ἱεροῖς γράμμασιν [i.e. hieroglyphics] ἐπιδείκνυνται. Philo elsewhere attributes symbolic discourse to the Pythagoreans (*quod omnis prob. lib.* 3) and the Essenes (*ibid.* 82). In the light of the Egyptian or Pythagorean character of symbolic discourse in seemingly all other antique sources, this last attribution of Philo should be seen as an appropriation, for the Jews, of a form of esoteric transmission of wisdom from cultural traditions of a known and respected antiquity and authority in Hellenic, and especially in Platonist, milieus. Further research into his use of the *symbolon* would doubtless shed light both on Philo's use of Neopythagorean material and identity and his depiction of the Jews' relationship to the Egyptians.

[190] E.g. Froidefond 1988, 90, who essays to define the term in Plutarch as: '… prise comme représentation concrète d'une abstraction.' While accurate, this describes rather than defines the trope.

[191] As demonstrated in detail by Struck 2004 *passim*. Cf. Coulter 1976, 60–68; Froidefond 1988, 90, who sees the terms enigma, *symbolon* and *mythos* as interchangeable in Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris*. Philo of Alexandria gives a methodological statement which supports this modern appreciation of the connection between symbol and enigma: 'Another sense (*nous*) is shown to have an esoteric meaning by the *symbolon; symbola* are open statements [the true meanings of] which are not clear and not apparent.' (*De spec. leg.* I 200: Μηνύεται δὲ καὶ νοῦς ἕτερος αἰνιγματώδη λόγον ἔχον τὸν διὰ συμβόλων· σύμβολα δ' ἐστι τὰ λεχθέντα φανερὰ ἀδήλων καὶ ἀφανῶν.) Cf. *quod omnis prob. lib.* 3: the Pythagorean command not to walk on the well-frequented road

associated with the Pythagoreans and the Egyptians (specifically, the Egyptian temple-cult), along with the exceptional Philonic Moses.[192] We never, to my knowledge, find a symbolic method attributed to Plato, and only rarely to Hellenic myth-makers.[193] A description of the Pythagorean symbolic method survives in a fragment of Plutarch's lost work on Pythagorean matters which nicely sums up the themes of Pythagorean and mystic silence as *logos* and the self-hiding public secret discussed in the previous chapter:

> And indeed, nothing is so characteristic of the Pythagorean philosophy as the symbolic method, a type of teaching compounded of speech and silence like in an initiatory rite. So that they do not say 'I shall sing to those with understanding – shut your gates, uninitiated ones!' Instead, a single statement produces light and meaning for the experienced while being dark and meaningless to the unskilled. For as the lord at Delphi neither speaks nor hides, but signifies, as Heraclitus has it, so what seems to be stated in the Pythagorean symbols is hidden, and what is hidden is understood (*Moralia* vol. VII, fr. 202 Sandbach = Stob. 3.1.199).

Intriguing as the *symbolon* is, it is with enigma that the Platonists are most concerned. Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris* is full of the enigmatic method, as we might expect from the foregoing discussion; a wide range of Egyptian myths and practices are subjected to the searchlight of philosophical decoding, and, while a whole range of hermeneutic terms are deployed by Plutarch, 'enigma' preponderates by far; many examples have been cited in the course of this chapter, and many more might be.[194] Indeed, Plutarch's work in general constitutes our best surviving example of enigmatic interpretation in Middle Platonism if we set aside Philo of Alexandria.

Philo is a deeply esoteric reader; for him, the delivery of the truth in an 'unadorned and naked' form is the work of unreflective, work-shirking and unphilosophic practitioners.[195] For Philo, Moses does not narrate myths, but 'typological *exempla* inviting (the reader) to use allegorical explication

'indicates esoterically through a symbol' (αἰνιττόμενος διὰ συμβόλου) that one should keep silent about philosophic matters before the masses.

[192] E.g. Plutarch *de Is.* 10.354e, where the terms enigma and *symbolon* blend, along with *mystêriôdes*, into a vague assertion of Pythagorean and Egyptian esotericism.

[193] Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, where the Homeric cave in question is repeatedly termed a *symbolon* (see Struck 2004, 23), is a notable example.

[194] See Froidefond 1988, 81–88; 79 n. 2 for a list of passages employing αἰνίττεσθαι and cognate terms.

[195] *De opif. m.* 1 ff.: ἀκαλλώπιστα καὶ γυμνά. The present discussion is based on Casel 1919, 79–81, who collects a broad range of Philonic passages related to the philosopher's hermeneutic method.

as to the subtextual meanings'.[196] Moses is assimilated by Philo to the Hellenic model of the theologian founder-figure: not only a *prophêtês,* he is a *theologos*.[197] The lawgiver enigmatises (αἰνίττεται) constantly;[198] the Mosaic laws are all to be read esoterically by the philosophically adept,[199] and, as in Plutarch's Egyptian cult in *On Isis and Osiris*, religious institutions such as ritual implements (*de vit. Mos.* 101–105) and vestments (117–132) are read as *symbola* concealing elaborate philosophical meanings. We may note that, while scripture generally has overt and hidden sides for Philo,[200] the term enigma is evoked specifically in the Mosaic context to indicate the esoteric writing of a lawgiver who wished to hide the deeper meaning from those unsuitable to hear it. Again, enigma is read as an act of hiding in the distant past made manifest by philosophical reading; again, the Philonic text, by drawing attention to the enigma, is in effect breaking the silence so wisely instituted by the founder.

The Limits of Esoteric Reading in Middle Platonism

In an important article Robert Lamberton has approached the question of a Neoplatonist tradition in terms of esoteric reading: where the Late Platonists posited and then read a secret perennial wisdom in their canonical texts, Lamberton sees an esoteric hermeneutic at work, and it is precisely this hermeneutic, in his analysis, which constitutes the 'Platonist tradition'.[201] Lamberton sees this hermeneutic tendency as typical among the later Platonists, but suspects, with some justification, that it was the rule throughout the Middle Platonist period;[202] he even goes far as to suggest that when Platonists refer to the unwritten doctrines of Plato they are referring, '… in an easily-intelligible way, to a tradition of interpretation.'[203]

Lamberton doubts that there is a set of interpretative rules which might span Platonism as a movement: 'There was certainly no uniform hermeneutics at work here.' We are faced with the problem of the limits of interpretation. But he notes that the idea of an esoteric writing-practice is

[196] This seems a just rendering of the rather obscure δείγματα τύπων ἐπ' ἀλληγορίαν παρακαλοῦντα κατὰ τὰς δι' ὑπονοιῶν ἀποδόσεις (*ibid.* 157).
[197] E.g. *de vit Mos.* II 115.
[198] *Ibid.* 154 *et saepissime.*
[199] See Casel 1919, 79.
[200] E.g. ἡ ῥητή and ἡ δι' ὑπονοιῶν: *de Abrah.* 88 ff.
[201] Lamberton 1995, 150–151 *et passim*. Lamberton makes this claim in a more nuanced manner than I have paraphrased it here.
[202] *Ibid.* 151.
[203] *Ibid.* 144.

indeed a constant across the range of materials which the Platonists used.[204] I would suggest that there are some discernible interpretative rules to be found in the multifarious instances of Platonist esoteric reading, based precisely on the act of esoteric reading itself. It is profitable to apply the typology of mystical hermeneutics of Joseph Katz, an assiduous observer of mystical traditions in religious movements, to Platonist enigmatic reading. The similarities between the two types of esoteric hermeneutic are instructive, as are the differences.

Katz suggests that hermeneutics in mystical traditions tend to follow five basic rules:

1. First, each tradition holds that there are things that the canonical texts do not (and could not) claim and do not (and could not) teach.
2. Second, each mystical tradition recognizes specific texts as canonical, and not others.
3. Moreover, mystical interpretation must at least generally conform to accepted moral rules – and often mystics set far higher standards.
4. Then, too, when one provides a reading of a canonical text, despite the legitimate interpretational multiformity . . . , the original context of the relevant scriptural verses has to be taken into account and 'respected' (this is a very broadly interpreted rule).
5. . . . the mystical interpreter, while searching out the underlying purposes and truths encoded in the canonical sources, generally acknowledges both the objective correctness and the value of the exoteric doctrine entailed in the literal meaning of the authoritative text.[205]

The first postulate is valid throughout Platonist exegesis: no Platonist claims, for example, that Plato did not teach the immortality of the soul, or that the dialogues deny the existence of the Forms. Nor could they do so and be taken seriously.

The second postulate applies very well to Platonist methods of canon-building, as explored in the present chapter. Due sensitivity to the differing ways in which Platonist philosophers and religious thinkers approach, and construct, their canons is of course needed. The debate over Aristotle within Platonism, discussed on page 90 and further in Appendix B, page 259 ff., provides a concrete example of the way in which canon-formation

[204] *Ibid*. 150.
[205] Katz 2000, 18–20.

worked in the Platonist milieu through a process of published argument. Aristotle's eventual canonisation, conversely, shows how a respect for canonical authority, once established, functioned: Aristotle provides exegetic material for Plotinus and the later Platonists in a way which integrates him with the school of the ancients, even at the cost of considerable exegetic pains. By the same token, we see Middle Platonists hard at work in the effort to define which authors should be excluded from the canon; the surviving fragments of Numenius' *On the Academy's Abandonment of Plato* make it clear that this work was a *tour de force* of this sort of exclusion.[206]

Katz's third postulate brings a moral dimension into the exegetic question which has been absent from the present inquiry, and the current discussion cannot hope to do justice to the question of Middle Platonist morality or ethics. We may say, for completeness' sake, that this postulate is, nevertheless, a good fit, with certain reservations. Platonists were never of an antinomian bent; they seem to have been content to go along with the ethical norms of society at large and avoid any conflicts in that regard – perhaps they were inspired in this by the fate of Socrates – but philosophical elitism also allowed them to revalue many of the normative activities of society at large (religious rituals being an important example). Of course, Platonism followed Plato in positing a strict ethical code for philosophers; the philosophers of the *Laws* and *Republic* constitute a social class set apart partly by the stringent ethical purity of their conduct. Platonism, then, differs from some mystical movements in that, positing 'far higher standards', it exempts itself from the common law; traditional religious observances, for example, could be scorned by Platonists, who nevertheless found truths hidden within them. The summary character of this treatment of Middle Platonist ethics is evident, but as ethical questions are far from the central concerns of this book, we leave the matter here.

The fourth postulate, taken in a Platonist context, applies very well to the Platonists' historical understanding; regarding esotericism, a main subject of this book, we have seen how Plato's doctrines, and the doctrines of other privileged expounders of the perennial tradition, were seen as having been delivered esoterically for concrete historical reasons, and sometimes in a specific historical context. We have seen that the Platonists read their sources more or less under the influence of the 'intentional fallacy'; their readings were concerned with the imagined intention of the original authors or founders. As the next chapter will show in some detail, Plotinus'

[206] Ffr. 24–28. See Boys-Stones 2001, 138–142.

treatment of Plato's text is better understood when we consider the historical context in which Plotinus understands it – that is, as coming at a latter phase of a tradition of perennial wisdom.

Finally, Katz's fifth postulate is perhaps the best fit with the interpretative strategies outlined in this chapter, and brings up the importance of emphasising that the esoteric reading of Plato and other canonic sources as hiding deeper truths was not seen as bringing their overt doctrines into disrepute. This will become very clear in the following chapter on Plotinus' hermeneutics of the tradition: again, one never contradicts the canon, even when one's reading would in fact seem to distort it beyond recognition. The extreme lengths of *contresens* to which Plotinus will go to preserve the correctness of Plato's text, while simultaneously reading it as concealing a different, or even antithetical meaning, are a clear example of this dynamic of interpretation.

This typology, with due alterations allowing for the special characteristics of the philosophic genre, and applied in a sensitive fashion, gives some idea of the unwritten rules of interpretation within which the Middle Platonists read their traditional forbears. Special care is needed if the rather broad statements of the foregoing chapter as to the absolute authority of the Middle Platonist canon are not to be seen as somehow equating Middle Platonist reading with the scriptural approaches beginning to arise in Christianity around the same time. An absolute authority arising out of philosophic culture in the Roman empire will have always been treated with what, to Christian eyes, would have seemed like a shocking amount of liberty. Later Platonists, likewise, saw the Christians' deference to a set of revealed texts as a slavish obedience to an untried and probably bad master.

And yet the degree to which a typology formulated for the study of religions is applicable to a philosophic movement should perhaps not surprise us in the context of Middle Platonism. In their construction of a tradition of truth, their stance as interpreters of this tradition rather than as innovators and their incorporation of plainly religious materials, the Platonists are not only continuing long-term trends intrinsic to philosophy as a genre, but also show aspects of a broad change in ways of thinking that began in their time and which informed philosophy and new religious movements. This was the rise of 'orthodoxy' as an element in discourse;[207] not orthodoxy understood according to the usage which developed within Christianity, but the broader change in ways of thinking in the empire which led to the possibility, and eventually the necessity, of a single tradition being granted sole access to the truth.

[207] See Athanassiadi 2002; 2006.

The canonisation of tradition in later Platonism was doubtless partly inspired by the scriptural approach to text which, with the rise of Christianity, became an enemy strategy to be countered; one battled scripture with counter-scripture.[208] This process takes an overt form in the religious politics of the emperor Julian,[209] but can be seen already in more subtle form in Plotinus.[210] The point here is not to suggest that Middle Platonist exegesis was a 'religious' movement, nor that it was on the whole consciously concerned with countering a perceived threat from any religious group – the threat of deviation within philosophy itself was generally seen as the much greater threat to the integrity of the 'tradition' than any religious movement, although Celsus' *True Account*, among other works, did attack Christianity directly.[211] Rather, it is to suggest that one important aspect of canon-building among the Middle Platonists, the formation and use of an absolute source of authority, was structurally similar to the 'scriptural' approach to canon-building found in contemporary Christian writers such as Irenaeus, in that it sought to establish a pedigree which was unassailable because embedded within an unimpeachable canon, and also sought to establish its pedigree in opposition to its Other, the texts, authors and ideologies excluded from the tradition. Some early Christian thinkers made the corresponding opposite move, and sought to assimilate the prestige of philosophy to Christianity, arguing that Christian religion was in fact the true philosophy.[212] The Middle Platonists and the early Christian canonists, then, were not for the most part directly confronting each other in hostility; they were rather both struggling, alongside many other intellectual currents, to make headway in a broad field of intellectual struggle whereon the developing discourse of 'orthodox thinking', with its new requirements, was being played out.

[208] Cf. e.g. Lamberton 1989, 16; 30.

[209] See Athanassiadi-Fowden 1981, 121–122 *et passim*. Salutius' 'pagan catechism' (Athanassiadi-Fowden 1981, 26–27), presumably composed at the emperor's request, is a heavy-handed example of this, importing a Christian literary form into unfamiliar Hellenic surroundings and attempting its *détournement*.

[210] See the discussion of Plotinus' anti-Gnostic polemic in the following chapter.

[211] The *True Account* is, by all accounts, the earliest anti-Christian text from any source; see Dillon 1977, 400. At Orig. *Cels*. 3.10 Celsus specifically attacks the Christians' lack of unanimity, to be contrasted with the unanimity of the True Account, the 'ancient *logos* which has existed from the beginning, which has always been maintained by the wisest nations and cities and wise men' (*ibid*. I.14).

[212] See Cox 1983, 18.

CHAPTER 4

Plotinus and 'The Ancients': Tradition, Truth and Transcendence

> Mystery is neither a set of abstruse doctrines to be taken on faith nor a secret prize for the initiated. Mystery is a referential openness into the depths of a particular tradition, and into conversation with other traditions. The referential openness is fleeting. As Plotinus said, as soon as one thinks one has it, one has lost it. It is glimpsed only in the interstices of the text, in the tension between the saying and the unsaying.
>
> Sells 1994, 8.

I have argued that there were certain typical themes which characterised a Platonist perennialism discernible across a wide spectrum of second-century Platonist thought. The significance of this line of argument for understanding Plotinus is the subject of the present chapter. Plotinus, like Plutarch, Numenius and Celsus, believed in the wisdom of the ancients, and the *Enneads* show a thoroughgoing deference and culture of respect toward the canonic sages of the past. But most importantly for this discussion, Plotinus applies a hermeneutic of enigma and esoteric meaning to this tradition in a way which seems to have been unprecedented and innovative: like the Middle Platonists he finds wisdom hidden in myths and rituals, but unlike them, he also unearths it, with the same methodology, in Plato.

The tradition to which Plotinus allies himself has an 'open' side – the realm of philosophical dialectic, the disputes and liberties proper to a culture of *parrhêsia* and the 'republic of letters' of Græco–Roman Hellenism – but there is no corner of Plotinian philosophy which is not also informed by an esoteric privileging of knowledge. This chapter will help to nuance and complete our picture of the 'open' aspects of Plotinus' project with a contextualised understanding of the ways in which the practice of esoteric reading and writing define his relationship to – or construction of – a perennial tradition.

The Plotinian Idea of Tradition

In light of the well-known remark of Plotinus, cited at the beginning of the previous chapter, that he is not an innovator but an exegete of the ancients, and of the evidence presented subsequently for a widespread Platonist tradition of perennialism, it will come as no surprise that Plotinus may profitably be described as a Platonist perennialist. While the formulation of Platonist perennialism formulated in the present work is in some respects new, the fact that Plotinus saw himself as indebted to an immemorial tradition is well known.[1] The outstanding task is to investigate the contours of this putative tradition in the *Enneads* with special reference to its esoteric aspects.

To begin with, we should take into account the fact that Plotinus' writings are deeply classicising: there is no explicit reference to anyone later than Epicurus in the *Enneads*,[2] with one important exception to be discussed below. A reader of the *Enneads* could be forgiven for thinking that the philosophic tradition had been silent for nigh on six hundred years before Plotinus' time. But we know from Porphyry that Plotinus' philosophic seminar made extensive use of near-contemporary authors, especially Middle Platonists and Aristotelean commentators: Cronius, Numenius, Alexander of Aphrodisias and others.[3] To modern eyes, then, Plotinus was engaged with theories and debates current in his time; he was in fact part of quite contemporary developments in philosophy.[4] We know that he was accused of plagiarising the works of the second-century Numenius; this is evidence, again, for a contemporary style of thought in his philosophy as seen by his peers.[5] His presentation, however, grounds itself exclusively in authors and traditions of the distant past. The *Enneads* are presented as in dialogue with the ancients.

The Ancients in Plotinus

When Plotinus refers to 'the ancients', οἱ παλαιοί, he is referring primarily to philosophers of the Classical period;[6] the Presocratic philosophers are

[1] Various sides to the question of Plotinus' self-definition in terms of perennial tradition have had important treatments by Eon 1970, Charrue 1978 and Hadot 1987, to all of which the following discussion is indebted.

[2] Noted by Charrue 1978, 33.

[3] Porph. *Plot.* 14.

[4] Cf. Dillon 1977, 414.

[5] Porph. *Plot.* 17.

[6] An 'ancient account' (παλαιὸς λόγος) or similar formulation is sometimes cited which would seem to refer rather to non-philosophical traditions of truth (e.g. the doctrine that the virtues are

sometimes distinguished as 'the very ancient' (οἱ πάνυ παλαιοί)[7] and 'the archaic' (οἱ ἀρχαίοι).[8] As mentioned above, Pythagoras and Pherecydes seem to straddle the two periods in Platonist eyes, and are sometimes seemingly grouped among *theologoi* as well.

Plotinus' vagueness makes it difficult to draw solid lines between different classes of ancient predecessors, nor is there much evidence that he drew such lines. But an interesting consistency can be found in his references to these predecessors: the appellation 'the ancients' in Plotinus never serves merely to indicate a period in history. It indicates not only the respect for antiquity that we would expect from a classicising writer, but also a philosophical lineage behind which lies a unanimity of doctrine.[9] Evidence of this may be found in the fact that the Stoics whom Plotinus wishes to refute, and the Epicureans whom he heartily attacks, are never, as far as I can see, included among the ancients; instead, their views may be refuted precisely by the contrasting views of the ancients.[10] The primary criterion for belonging to the ancients is to be canonical, not to be ancient.[11]

The ancients constitute a *tradition*, a school of thought. Their doctrines include the Platonist theories of Forms and recollection[12] and other teachings which we might call common Platonist-Pythagorean *topoi*, such as the immortality of the soul and cyclical metempsychosis.[13] Plotinus also finds in the ancients his doctrine of the transcendent, ineffable One beyond being,[14] the doctrinal point which is most commonly seen as the essential 'Neoplatonist' position, a point returned to below.

Merlan goes as far as to formulate a concrete lineage of philosophic predecessors for Plotinus: 'It becomes obvious that for Plotinus Anaxagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato, *and Aristotle* belong to the same αἵρεσις, whose founders were Pythagoras and Pherecydes.'[15] With the problematic exception of Aristotle, these names will be uncontroversial

purifications which, from the context, is intended as an evocation of mystery tradition [I.6[1]6.1–5]), echoing Plato's similar references to 'ancient accounts' (e.g. *Phd.* 69 c3-d2). 'The ancients', *sic*, seems always to refer to philosophers.

7 VI.1[42]1–2, probably citing Thales, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras and Democritus, although doctrines rather than names are given.

8 As at V.1[10]9.28.

9 Cf. Charrue 1978, 19.

10 E.g. VI.1[42]30.28 *ad fin.*

11 As mentioned in n. 5, this tendency would only increase with time, to the point that Proclus might refer to Iamblichus, who had died only a few generations earlier, as an ancient.

12 Forms: V.8[31]5.24-5; *anamnesis*: IV.3[27]25.31–33.

13 VI.4[22]16.4–8.

14 V.1[10]6.2-8; VI.8[39]19.12–19.

15 1969, 7. The italics are Merlan's; Aristotle's interesting place in the Plotinian lineage is addressed in Appendix B.

to Plotinian scholars;[16] while he never defines his lineage in such a straightforward manner, Plotinus clearly sees himself as part of a tradition of thinkers something very like that outlined by Merlan.[17] In attempting to contextualise this construction of canon, we should remember that Plotinus subscribed to the widespread belief in a gradual decadence in human nature and affairs over time;[18] philosophy and knowledge of the truth have been in decline ever since the most ancient times, and Plato is represented, not as the originator, but as a final iteration, of the pristine tradition of truth.[19]

The ancients, for Plotinus, have a special status vis à vis philosophical disputation: in propounding a doctrine, Plotinus tells us, it is important to show that it is in agreement with that of the ancients, 'or at least not in disagreement'.[20] But Plotinus is aware that this may be difficult, as the ancients can contradict one another. Introducing an inquiry into the nature of time and eternity, Plotinus says:

> . . . the statements of the ancients on these matters differ one from the other, and it may be that the commentaries on these [statements] also differ; thus we leave off and reckon it sufficient, if asked, if we are able to say what they [the ancients] thought, happy to be freed from further inquiry. One must suppose that certain of the ancient and blessed philosophers have found the truth. But which of them especially achieved this, and how we might attain to understanding concerning these matters, it is right to enquire.[21]

This passage encapsulates well the role of the active philosopher pursuing truth in the tradition; presented with an authoritative philosophical corpus, his role is to seek and explicate within it. Again, philosophic harmonisation does not involve denying differences of opinion within the

[16] A glance at the *index fontium* in the edition of Henry and Schwyzer shows their presence in the *Enneads*. The Presocratic philosophers, especially, tend to be used in a superficial and anecdotal way by Plotinus; his knowledge of their texts may have been based in *florilegia* of his time rather than in their full works. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Plotinus respected them and saw them as members of the ancient tradition, although he found their 'archaic' manner of expression lacking in clarity (see p. 130).

[17] Cf. Charrue 1978, 19, citing the specific authors mentioned at V.1[10]8 and 9; V.1[10]9.1.1 (discussed below); IV.8[31]1.

[18] E.g. II.3[20]16.26–29: οἷον ἄνδρες ἄλλοι πάλαι, νῦν δὲ ἄλλοι, τῷ μεταξὺ καὶ ἀναγκαίῳ τῶν λόγων εἰκόντων τοῖς τῆς ὕλης παθήμασι (the *logôn* in question are the formative principles of men's souls, rather than discourses or accounts; see Appendix C, p. 264).

[19] Cf. Charrue 1978, 20–21.

[20] VI.4[22]16.4–7. Cf. III.6[1]2.5–8.

[21] III.7[45]1.9–16. Unsurprisingly, it is Plato who has especially achieved this understanding, travelling under the name of παλαιοῖς καὶ μακαρίοις ἀνδράσιν (*ibid.* 7.10–12), as a subsequent direct reference to *Tim.* 37d7 shows (ll. 19–20).

canon; it seeks to find the underlying unity which renders these differences relatively unimportant.

It is thus Plotinus' belief that certain ancients fell short of a complete exposition of the truth; this is not to say that they were wrong, only that they possessed a greater or lesser degree of completeness in their understanding or presentation. The long philosophic survey at V.1[10]8–9 supports this reading. Having discussed Plato's (Plotinian) theory of three primary hypostases, Plotinus concludes with the famous passage cited at the beginning of the previous chapter, linking his thought with that of the ancients, and citing Plato as proof of this identification (V.1[10]8.1–14). He then goes on to discuss Parmenides, noting that Parmenides in Plato's dialogue speaks with more precision (ἀκριβέστερον) about the One than did the historical Parmenides (14–27), Anaxagoras, who also lacks clarity 'on account of his archaic character' (δι' ἀρχαιότητα), Empedocles and Heraclitus (V.1[10]9.1–7), all of whose accounts of the One differ. In each case, Plotinus mentions the degree to which these philosophers 'got it right': Anaxagoras knew that the One was separate and intelligible, while Heraclitus knew that bodies were subject to constant change and coming-to-be. Finally, Aristotle is discussed: his conception of noetic heavenly spheres, which, for Plotinus, divide up the noetic 'in a different way from Plato' (11–12), is criticised as 'positing a plausible scenario, but one which is not philosophically necessary' (*ibid.* 12: τὸ εὔλογον οὐκ ἔχον ἀνάγκην τιθέμενος). Plotinus criticises Aristotle's view in a vigorous manner until line 28; a close reading of the text, however, shows that Plotinus shies away from saying that Aristotle is simply wrong, although this is essentially his message here.

The final lines of Section 9 elucidate the whole procedure:

> Thus, those of the archaic thinkers (τῶν ἀρχαίων) who are most closely aligned with Pythagoras and his followers and with Pherecydes were in greatest possession of this nature [*sc.* the nature of the One]; however, some of them worked these matters out in their own accounts, while others demonstrated them not in [written] accounts, but in unwritten discussions, while still others did not deal with them at all.[22]

The first important point to note from these passages, and in all of Plotinus' explicit engagements with his tradition, is the culture of humble politeness with which the philosopher should approach his predecessors. Even Aristotle is treated with kid gloves, although Plotinus plainly feels he is wrong in his teachings on the planetary spheres. This is in line with

[22] V.1[10]9.27 *ad fin.*

the widespread culture of canonicity and respect for canonical authors' authority in philosophic matters outlined in the preceding chapter, and is understood by Plotinus as part of the basic comportment and 'good manners' of a late antique philosophic practitioner; the Gnostics whom he attacks in *Ennead* II.9 are said to be 'unphilosophical' precisely for breeching this practice of decorum.[23] Due reverence for the tradition is thus a prerequisite for approaching traditional materials in a proper way.

We also note, however, that Plotinus is quite comfortable criticising the Presocratic philosophers for a lack of clarity, due to their 'archaic character'; *akribeia*, a term implying both 'exactness of thought' and 'clarity of exposition' is mentioned here and elsewhere as the chief way in which Plato excels over his predecessors.[24] Elsewhere, Pythagoras is described as unclear 'because he wrote poetry', again, a reference to the use of expository methods lacking in accuracy by the truly ancient sages, although we do not know what work, presumably a pseudo-Pythagorean poem, is meant.[25] On a rhetorical level, then, Plato is set apart from the Presocratics not on account of a greater possession of the truth, but on account of a facility for expressing it clearly; Pythagoras and Pherecydes constitute the yardstick of truth in the passage under discussion. It should be noted, of course, that certain early philosophers were also simply not of the Plotinian *haeresis;* Democritus, for example, is not one of the Ancients.[26]

We note further the reference to orality in the closing lines of the passage, which goes a long way toward providing a mechanism for

[23] See II.9[33]6.23, 26–27, 36, where Plotinus roundly berates the Gnostics for their breach of proper philosophic comportment in maligning the ancients. His attack here is specifically aimed at the Gnostic's lack of the proper philosophic approach; in essence, at their appalling manners (see *ibid.* 14.11–13; 6.43–52).

[24] After a survey of the unclear Presocratics Heraclitus, Empedocles and the enigmatic Pythagoras and his school, the 'divine Plato' is adduced as the best authority for matters relating to the descent of the soul into bodies (IV.8[31]1.23–26). Cf. V.1[10]8.24, where Plato's Parmenides is more clear than the historical Parmenides. Cf. Athanassiadi 2006, 97 n. 80.

[25] IV.8[6]1.21–23. Cf. Maximus of Tyre's view of philosophic history, whereby the ancient poets wrote philosophy 'wrapped up' in poetic finery, but moderns, having lost the poetic subtlety of their forbears, laid the previously hidden doctrines bare (IV.3), or Plutarch's comparable view of the history of philosophy (n. 50).

[26] The sole exception which I have found to this rule occurs at VI.1[42]1.1 ff., where οἱ πάνυ παλαιοί clearly refer to such thinkers as Democritus and other materialists. This would seem to be a simple slip from Plotinus' usual practice of confining the name 'ancients' to thinkers notionally associated with the great tradition that he espouses. In a kind of coda at the end of the same treatise, Plotinus returns to his habitual usage, noting that, in considering what various (Presocratic) thinkers have said about the different kinds of being, one should enquire independently, taking into account 'what has been said *against* their opinions by the ancients [italics mine]' (*ibid.* 30.31-2: τὰ παρὰ τῶν ἀρχαίων πρὸς τὰς δόξας αὐτῶν εἰρημένα).

harmonising the seemingly conflicting views of the Presocratics: they may have elucidated the metaphysical truth in unwritten conclaves (*synousiais)*, much as Pythagoras, Plato and Plotinus' own teacher Ammonius had done. They may also not have examined a particular problem or set of problems. We may adduce the reference to 'hidden expression' of the truth among the ancients cited in the last chapter: Plotinus is an exegete of ancient ideas which were expressed long ago, *but not openly*.[27] Esoteric hermeneutics provide a key to the construction of a single *hæresis* among the ancients.[28]

The Perennial Wisdom in Plotinus

As we have seen, Platonist perennialism was a philosophic movement that did not concern itself solely with philosophers. The references to belief in ancient sages, lawgivers and theologians among the Middle Platonists serve to contextualise the *Enneads* in this respect, where we find similar beliefs, often implicit, informing Plotinian discourse. It is clear from the *Enneads* that the ancient philosophers are not the only source of truth; Plotinus often reads traditional stories from Hellenic mythology,[29] as well as the ritual heritage of the mystery cults,[30] as containing hidden philosophical truths.[31] Plotinus follows Platonic and Platonist precedent in referring to ancient accounts (παλαιοὶ λόγοι) as sources of truth to be discussed alongside the later contributions of philosophers.[32] These institutions, in Plotinus as in the earlier perennialists, hide esoteric philosophic

[27] V.1[10]8.10–12, cited p. 86.

[28] Appendix B provides additional discussion of the importance of esoteric reading for Plotinus' engagement with Plato and Aristotle.

[29] E.g. IV.8[31]1.21 (cf. Hes. *Op*. 60–89. *Theog*. 521); III.5[36]2.24; V.8[31]4.25–6; V.2[11]22; VI.2[19]22.1.1 and 13; VI.8[39]19.1.14; III.7[45]13.10. See Eon 1970, 273; Charrue 1978, 25; Boys-Stones 2001, 147. On myth in Plotinus, see generally Cilento 1960.

[30] VI.9[9]11.1 ff. (quoted in full on p. 8); cf. I.6[1]6.1–5 (quoted in full n. 33); III.6[1]19.25–27. Cf. Stroumsa 1996a, 21.

[31] The present argument goes against the judgement of Armstrong (1990c, 420–421), who supposes that the allegorical reading of myth and poetry, while present in the *Enneads*, is 'not a matter of much importance' to Plotinus. Part of my difference of interpretation stems from the fact that I do not define Platonist enigma simply as allegoresis (see p. 117). The use of myth and poetry in Plotinus is undeniably very understated when compared, for example, to e.g. Plutarch; I will show, however, that Plotinian esoteric hermeneutics of these extra-philosophical sources provides both a strong source of authority with a real impact for dialectic, and an important means of consolidating the philosopher's own views as belonging to an ancient and well-attested *hairesis.* Cf. Clark 2010, 228.

[32] I.6[1]6.1–5: Ἔστι γὰρ δή, ὡς ὁ παλαιὸς λόγος, καὶ ἡ σωφροσύνη καὶ ἡ ἀνδρία καὶ πᾶσα ἀρετὴ κάθαρσις καὶ ἡ φρόνησις αὐτή. Δίο καὶ αἱ τελεταὶ ὀρθῶς αἰνίττονται τὸν μὴ κεκαθαρμένον καὶ εἰς Ἅιδου κείσεσθαι ἐν βορβόρῳ διὰ κάκην φίλον· Cf. e.g. Pl. *Phd.* 69 c3–d2.

doctrines that were concealed by their wise founders from the unlettered and unphilosophic masses.

We might thus expect to find in Plotinus, as in the Middle Platonists, a group of sages responsible for these acts of hiding, and we do so in occasional references scattered throughout the *Enneads*. Plotinus refers to *sophoi* who hid messages in the institutions which they founded. Interestingly, these sages are often priests or other sacred practitioners. Sometimes these sages are *theologoi*, who, filling out the few brief references in Plotinus with what we have seen in Plutarch, may be understood as theological poets.[33] While Homer and Hesiod are not explicitly called *theologoi* in the *Enneads*, Homer's presence in particular is notable as one of Plotinus' favourite sources, and Homer speaks in enigma.[34] *Theologoi* are mentioned, in one passage, alongside priests (*hierôn*), both understood as having relevant opinions on philosophic matters;[35] it is unclear where the priests end and the theologic poets begin, but *sophoi*, *theologoi* and *hiereis* taken together undoubtedly comprise an ancient class of religious specialists with access to the perennial wisdom and an interest in hiding its truths within religious institutions.

This wisdom, then, may be found in the *teletai* of mystery religions,[36] and often transmitted by religious specialists.[37] Discussing the nature of matter, which for Plotinus is essentially a negative, sterile lack of qualities, contrasted with the fecundity of the *logoi* which arise in soul from its noetic nature, Plotinus suggests that, 'It was for this reason, I think, that the ancient sages, [communicating] esoterically and secretly in the mystery rites (μυστικῶς καὶ ἐν τελεταῖς αἰνιττόμενοι), portrayed the archaic Hermes with his member always ready for the work of procreation', the ithyphallic Hermes indicating the generative nature of the noetic *logos*.[38] Again, in an elaborate exposition of the philosopher's encounter with the

[33] E.g. III.5[36]2.2: περὶ δὲ τοῦ ὂν θεὸν (τὸν Ἔρωτα) τίθενται ... θεολόγοι καὶ Πλάτων κτλ. The context is a discussion of the treatments of *erôs* in the *Symposium* of Plato; here Plato's invented myths are notionally assimilated to a more ancient 'theological' tradition.

[34] I.6[1]8.18–20. Edwards notes (2000, 27 n. 148) that Homer is the second most quoted author in the *Enneads*, after Plato. Plotinus interprets a passage from the *Odyssey* philosophically at I.6[1]8.16–21 (see Lamberton 1989, 106–107). Lamberton notes that a passage from Homer specifically condemned by Plato (*R.* II.381d) is quoted by Plotinus with approval (VI.5[23]12.31–2), an 'instance – however mild – of defensive interpretation' (Lamberton 1989, 98–9). Put another way, this is an example of the authority of the theologians (Homer) in dialogue with that of the ancients (Plato), and of the former actually trumping the latter.

[35] III.5[36]8.21.

[36] To summarise, at VI.9[9]11.1 ff; III.6[1]19.35-27; I.6[1]6.1–5.

[37] To summarise, at III.5[36]8.17–23; VI.9[9]11.27; III.5[36]2.2; V.8[31]6.1; IV.3[27]11.1–3.

[38] III.6[1]19.35–27. The Plotinian concept of *logos* is discussed in Appendix C, p. 264 ff.

transcendent One beyond intellect, drawing heavily on cultic traditions, Plotinus uses the statues which stand before a temple sanctuary as symbols of intellect, as seen by the philosophic aspirant, and then passed by in the course of the ascent toward the unpredicated, unrepresentable One. 'These [statues] are images; and therefore it is transmitted esoterically by the wise among the interpreters of holy things how that god [intellect] is seen; and a wise priest who understands the enigma may make the contemplation real by entering the sanctuary.'[39] The architectural conventions of traditional Hellenic temples are read by Plotinus as encoding truths about the highest ontological realms, while the philosopher is transformed into a priest.

Plotinus elsewhere discusses how the Egyptian sages (οἱ Αἰγυπτίων σοφοί) used their hieroglyphics to illustrate the instantaneous, non-discursive nature of intellect,[40] an art which he contrasts with the later decline into alphabetic script, which he associates with discursive thinking.[41] Plotinus' intriguing reference to the ancient sages' (οἱ πάλαι σοφοί) art of 'ensouling' statues, reminiscent of the famous passage on the animation of statues in the Hermetic *Asclepius*, is seemingly made without any metaphorical intent, but cited as a historical example illustrating the current topic of discussion, the working of universal *sympatheia* and its effects on seemingly inanimate objects.[42] This latter passage, in particular, reminds us that, while Plotinus often uses religious materials in a metaphorical way, and sometimes in a bantering and lighthearted manner, he presents the ancient sages and theologians as having a concrete historical reality. These ancient *hieroi* were endowed with power in a concrete and, it must be said, philosophically significant sense; the position of these religious specialists in Plotinus' view of the history of truth should alert us to the need for considering Plotinian religion – that is, the philosopher's thoughts about the proper practical relationship to the gods – as part and parcel of consideration of his ideas of tradition and the transmission of wisdom.

Against the Gnostics: the Tradition as Hellenism

In light of these observations, it is worth examining Treatise 33, the attack *Against the Gnostics*, for its relevance to Plotinian ideas of tradition. This

[39] VI.9[9]11.27.
[40] V.8[31]6.1–9.
[41] *Ibid*. ll. 9–12.
[42] IV.3[27]11.1–3; cf. *Ascl*. 37.II (Nock and Festugière 1947, 347). On the so-called telestic art in later Platonism, see Boyancé 1955; Dodds 1968, 291–295; Lewy 1978, 495–496; Majercik 1989, 26.

treatise is unique in that it sees Plotinus refer directly to contemporary philosophic debate – indeed, to the current situation in his own circle.[43] It thus constitutes the sole exception to the classicising approach taken throughout the *Enneads*; the Gnostics' perversion of philosophy, in Plotinus' eyes, is heinous enough that he is willing to attack them directly, while remaining silent on every other philosopher or philosophic development of the preceding six hundred years.[44] In this treatise Plotinus gets his hands dirty, and provides unique evidence as to his view of the proper relation of the philosopher to tradition.

The philosophical grounds for Plotinus' attack have generally been seen as the 'anticosmic pessimism' of the Gnostics, their rejection of the world as evil,[45] along with their metaphysical proliferation of levels of reality, which Plotinus counters with an emphatic statement that there are three primary hypostases.[46] But just as sects among the early Christians attacked each other far more vehemently than they attacked pagans – those who claim to follow the 'true path' but in fact stray from it being more of a threat to an ideology than those who follow a different path altogether – Plotinus attacks the Gnostics not only for straightforward philosophical errors, but for what he perceives as their perversion of Plato, and of the Hellenic tradition as a whole.[47] Scholars have seen a defensive move here, Plotinus' philosophy having so much in common with the Gnostic movements he attacks.[48] As John Dillon points out: 'In the process of polemical self-definition, a notable phenomenon is the extent to which one finds oneself borrowing concepts and formulations from one's opponents.'[49]

[43] For the Gnostics among Plotinus' 'friends' see II.9[33]10.3–14; cf. Porph. *Plot.* 16. It is clear that these were people who frequented Plotinus' philosophic seminar.

[44] Plotinus does not name his opponents in this treatise (although the reference to *gnôsis* at II.9[33]13.10 may be an ironic reference to the name 'gnostics'); however, his polemic attacks specific items of Gnostic doctrine, thus leading Plotinus outside the canonical subjects of debate and into a wholly contemporary field of metaphysical speculation, where he is elsewhere loath to go.

[45] E.g. Armstrong 1992; Kalligas 2000, 124–125.

[46] II.9[33]1–2.

[47] II.9[33]6.1–10; 8; 44.

[48] E.g. Jonas 1971; Wallis 1992, 463. It was once common to deny any relationship between Plotinus' thought and Gnosticism (see van den Broek 1983 for a coherent statement of this position), but this has become less possible as scholarly knowledge of Gnosticism has increased. However, the precise nature of the relationship continues to be hotly debated. See Mazur 2010, 17–25 for an up-to-date history of this debate. Important works in this connection are Puech 1960, with discussion 175–190; Jufresa 1981; Kalligas 2000; Mazur 2005; Mazur 2010. The series *Nag Hammadi Studies*, published by Brill, contains a wealth of resources on Gnosticism, both editions and commentaries and secondary studies; Scholer 1971 and 1997 collect relevant bibliography. Especially important in the context of Platonism are Turner 2001; Mazur 2010.

[49] Dillon 1982, 60.

However, Plotinus' attack is not confined to philosophic doctrine. We have seen his criticism of what he sees as the Gnostics' execrable philosophic deportment: they argue tendentiously and without the proper reserved and pleasant style. Worse still, they treat the canonical tradition with contempt. The Gnostics, Plotinus says, should listen to the blessed and godlike philosophers (II.9[33]6.26-7 and 36) and to Plato (23), and 'accept their teachings with a good grace, since they are more ancient [than their own]' (εὐμενῶς δεχομένους τὰ ἐκείνων ὡς παλαιότερον, 37). Plotinus goes on to state that such correct doctrines as the Gnostics do hold are all from this tradition, with an implication that they have been pilfered rather than come by honestly, while others they invent in a quest to found their own philosophy (*ibid.* 10 ff; cf. 15.31–2). Plotinus also levels the related criticism that their doctrines are *new*,[50] or, rather, *not ancient*, in the full sense of both 'time-honoured' and 'canonical' discussed above. In light of the preceding discussion, we see what a strong attack this is, using the idea of perennial tradition as a tool of polemic.

The tradition invoked by Plotinus takes on very interesting contours in this polemical context. In this treatise, and here only, he uses the term '*hairesis*';[51] it seems clear that, already in Plotinus, the process by which the term for 'school of thought' came to mean 'heresy' is in operation, although still in an early stage of development.[52] The Gnostics want to found 'their own school' (ἰδία αἵρεσις).[53] Plotinus presents this statement as self-evidently incriminating; his intended audience are expected to share his perennialism, or at least his respect for the Platonist philosophic canon.

Also uniquely in this treatise, Plotinus refers to 'the Hellenes'. In fact, he refers to an 'ancient Hellenic *hairesis*', one which maintains the ascent from the cave and the step-by-step advance of the philosophic seeker toward the truth, familiar from Plato's *Republic*.[54] This may represent another early appearance of an ancient term in a new guise, this time the term 'Hellene' meaning 'pagan', as it came to do in Christian circles from about the time of Constantine.[55] At any rate, it is clear that Plotinus is responding to an

[50] II.9[33]5.37: τὶ τὸ καινὸν τοῦ λόγου·; 6.5-7: the Gnostics are καινολογούντων attempting to establish their own *hairesis*, in contrast to the ancient Hellenic [*sc. hairesis*], by fabricating new doctrines; 6.11: καινοτομοῦσιν. Athanassiadi (2006, 129) notes the word-play in *Ennead* II.9 between καινός, 'new', and κενός, 'vapid' or 'false'.

[51] II.9[33]6.6. and 15.4. These are the only appearance of *hairesis* as 'school of thought' in the *Enneads*; Plotinus uses the term elsewhere in its basic meaning of 'choice'.

[52] See Athanassiadi 2006, 19–22; 129–130.

[53] II.9[33]6.5–12.

[54] II.9[33]6.5–10; cf. Pl. *R.* VII 514a ff.

[55] On this evolution of the term, see Bowersock 1996, 10, who does not suggest such an early appearance of this usage as I am doing here.

attack on 'the Hellenes' by a group who identify themselves as something other than Hellenes, Greek though their sacred texts were,[56] and doubtless too their language of debate. But it is also a reference to the cultural institution of Hellenism, which had long come to refer to a basic educational standard of cultivation.[57] The Gnostics' belief that they can bypass Hellenic education, and the philosophic elite education which constituted the basis for philosophic class superiority, was an assault on a social order in which Platonist philosophy had a great stake. It is no accident that Plotinus' Hellenes have the gradual progression of the philosopher as their rallying-cry: this was the educational hierarchy through which Platonist social hierarchy was defined and implemented.

It is also possible that we should see this partly or wholly as a move on Plotinus' part toward a 'Hellenisation' of the tradition in the cultural or 'ethnic' sense. The orientalism discussed in the previous chapter among the Middle Platonists was even more prominent in Plotinus' successors; he is unique among surviving Late Platonists in having made only the sparsest reference to barbarian wisdom.[58] While an absence can only lead to an argument from silence, this is a very striking absence indeed, and suggestive of the conclusion that Plotinus took a minority view, envisioning the tradition as privileging Hellenic thinkers. This would be an especially interesting position in a native Egyptian, but of course we have no reason to think that Plotinus identified himself as such; Hellenism extended to the furthest bounds of the Roman empire, and the Græco-Egyptian identity had roots going back many centuries.

Hellenism, of course, was not understood solely as an ethnic or even a linguistic phenomenon in antiquity, but a broad-ranging cultural phenomenon including under its rubric a literary canon, educational norms and an 'art of living' which helped to define the cultivated classes of the Roman empire in late antiquity.[59] What we are seeing here, I would argue, is an early skirmish in the cultural struggle which took place between Christians and pagans for the right to 'ownership' of Hellenism, a struggle in which Plotinus is not usually seen as taking part. While the Sethian Gnostics in Plotinus' circle probably did not define themselves as 'Christians', Plotinus' polemics make clear that they defined themselves as against

[56] The texts mentioned by Porphyry (*Plot.* 16) as being read by the Gnostics, although extant only in Coptic, are generally agreed to have had Greek originals.

[57] See generally Brown 1971b, 14; 29–30; Armstrong 1990a; Bowersock 1996, 7 *et passim*.

[58] Cf. Armstrong 1990c, 421. The reference to the Egyptian sages (see p. 133) mentioned above is in fact the sole unambiguous reference in the *Enneads*.

[59] See authors cited n. 57.

Hellenism. Taking into account his construction of a tradition of truth hidden within traditional Hellenic myths and rites, assimilated to a chosen lineage of Greek philosophers, and his overt cultural polemic for the Hellenes in *Against the Gnostics*, we can perhaps venture to say that Plotinus is engaging in an early phase of the struggle for the cultural capital of Hellenism. This struggle would come to involve Christians who sought to exist within, or to 'Christianis' Hellenism, such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzos and especially Origen, and those who sought (to some degree at least) to reject it, such as the desert fathers, St Jerome and Chrysostom. On the other side were pagans like Celsus, Porphyry, the Emperor Julian and Proclus, who claimed Hellenism – increasingly viewed as synonymous with the great tradition – for their own. The Plotinian tradition wields the inherent power of antiquity and strong authority; it also lays claim to elements of cultural prestige and chauvinism.

Plotinian Hermeneutics of the Perennial Tradition

The Unwritten, Enigma and Secret Doctrines in Plotinus

The esoteric reading of myth and mystery surveyed above in the Middle Platonists brings religion into the fold of philosophy, allowing it to be mined as a source for potential philosophic truth and used as a source of authority for philosophy. As discussed, a key reading methodology was enigma, a rhetorical term adapted and used in a specific technical sense by the Platonists. Authoritative philosophers of the past, the Ancients, might speak with a certain riddling style, or deliver their doctrines in a fashion intended to conceal them from the many in the interests of philosophical elitism; they are decoded through dialectical reasoning. The religious founders delivered the truth in a different manner, if for similar reasons; they concealed it behind a screen of myth or symbolism, to be read as enigmas. While Pythagoras enjoys, in some Middle Platonists as in Plotinus, the status of both sage and philosopher,[60] in general the Ancients are philosophers, and the *sophoi* sages, each to be approached through the appropriate reading methodology. An interesting development of this methodological rule first appears in Plotinus: Plotinus applies 'enigmatic' and other esoteric modes of reading to the text of Plato. Plotinus applies the methodology of reading the *sophos* to the *philosopho*s, an early example of what would become a trend in later Platonism of increasingly dovetailing

[60] See p. 102.

the two wisdom traditions into one, and, correspondingly, of swapping methodologies between them.

Plotinus' reading of religious practices and architecture as esoteric text has been emphasised above, but the majority of enigmatic readings in the *Enneads* are of myths.[61] The myth of Lynceus, who saw into the earth, is an enigma for the kind of eyes human souls have in Intellect, with the ability to comprehend multiplicities instantaneously as wholes.[62] A man who sees his reflection in water, chases it and sinks serves as an enigma for those who pursue beautiful bodies rather than the Beautiful itself.[63] The myth of Kronos, wisest of the gods, who, before the birth of Zeus, kept back within himself all that he begat is an enigma (with wordplay between *Kronos* and *koros*, 'sufficiency') for the self-sufficiency of Intellect and the fact that it contains the forms and noetic gods.[64] This passage builds up to the famous affirmation of the antiquity of Plotinus' and Plato's school of thought quoted at the beginning of the last chapter (V.1[10]8.10–12), illustrating the way mythological discourse could be drawn into philosophic discourse to reinforce its antiquity and authority.

The myths of Plato are ostensibly treated no differently from mythic materials gathered from other sources:[65] the story of the two Aphrodites from Plato's *Symposium* 180d-e is read as an enigma for the fact that every soul is Aphrodite because of its innate love of the Good,[66] and the intricacies of characterisation and the myth's position in the dialogue are ignored.[67] The creation-myth of the *Timaeus* is also read as concealing philosophical truths.[68] Elsewhere, another passage from the *Timaeus* is quoted anonymously as 'esoterically and divinely said'.[69] The word

[61] See in addition to the passages cited below I.6[1]8.11; V.1[10]7.27 ff; IV.3[27]12.8–26, 14.5 *ad fin*; Many other esoteric readings of myth in the *Enneads* do not make specific reference to enigma, e.g. III.6[1]25–41; VI.9[9]11.25–30, 43–45; and c.

[62] V.8[31]4.26.

[63] I.6[1]8.11.

[64] V.1[10]7.33 ff.

[65] Cf. Lamberton 1989, 97–98.

[66] VI.9[9]9.31; cf. III.5[36]7–9 for the same myth at greater length.

[67] The other accounts of *erôs* in the *Symposium* are presented by Plato as trumped by Socrates' account of the teaching of Diotima, and, read in context, they would seem to constitute a strange source of wisdom for Plotinus. Plato read esoterically, however, is expected to express wisdom and truth at every stage of the dialogue. Plotinus' reading frees the myth from its dialogic context, just as he frees traditional stories from their religious context.

[68] VI.2[19]22.1; cf. V.8[31]8, an extended reading of Plato's myth of the demiurge in the *Timaeus*. Plato does not use enigma here, but he does *sêmainein,* 'indicate', which term often indicates a symbolic or otherwise indirect or hidden discourse in Plotinus (see p. 225).

[69] IV.1[21]2.49: τοῦτ' ἄρα ἐστι τὸ θείως ἠνιγμένον· κτλ, going on to quote *Tim*. 35a1–4.

'divinely' (θείως) emphasises the religious register of the passage cited, situating Plato's words among the other sources of truth hidden in myth, as inspired wisdom rather than reasoned knowledge.

Thus far, the methodology does not differ strikingly from earlier Platonists' uses of enigma. However, in some passages Plotinus breaks new ground with his Platonic reading; we see an occasional move of assimilation between the philosophic and the mythic without parallel in the surviving evidence of any previous Platonist. This takes various forms. At VI.8[39]19.14, discussing the nature of the first principle as part of a long apophatic passage, Plotinus cites the 'beyond being' (ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας) of *Republic* VI 509b9 as an enigma, but puts it in the mouth of the ancients.[70] The enigmatic form of reading is thus notionally applied to the 'perennially vague' forefathers of philosophy, rather than to Plato's dialectic. In another passage Plotinus discusses the nature of *erôs* and Aphrodite in a mythic-philosophic discourse drawing on Plato's *Symposium* and on traditional cultic customs; the two sources of mythology are interwoven to a degree that when Plotinus tells the reader that 'for this reason they said that she (Plato's heavenly Aphrodite) was "motherless", hiding their true meaning', it is unclear whether Plato or some unnamed theologic forefathers are meant.[71] One passage of Plotinus fully breaks down the barriers between Platonic myth and *logos*. At VI.2[19]22.1 ff., Plato speaks enigmatically (ᾐνιγμένως) of the way in which intellect sees the Forms in the complete living creature, referring to the mythologising discourse of the *Timaeus* (31b1 and 39e7–9), but slightly further on in the discussion (13–14) he quotes the *Parmenides* 144b4–c1, a dialectical passage from the least mythological of dialogues, as also containing Platonic enigma (αἰνιττόμενος ὁ Πλάτων).

This passage represents the earliest use of enigma, after Plato himself, which I have been able to find referring to an attributed philosophic text in a non-mythological register.[72] The method of enigma, previously associated primarily with religious materials, begins to merge with the realm of dialectic. This move should also, I think, be understood in the context of the absorption and adaptation of religious materials by Platonism. As with his characterisation of philosophers as priests, Plotinus' reading of Platonic myth as myths *simpliciter*, not separated from traditional myth

[70] χρὴ δὲ ἴσως καὶ τὸ ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας καὶ ταύτῃ νοεῖσθαι τοῖς παλαιοῖς λεγόμενον δι' αἰνίξεως, κτλ.

[71] III.5[36]2.24-25: ὅθεν αὐτὴν τούτῳ ᾐνίττοντο, τῷ ἀμήτορα εἶναι.

[72] Again, setting aside the Pythagoreans, who were especially associated with symbolic and enigmatic discourse.

at large, and of Platonic dialectic as enigma, are signs that Plotinus has gone further than his predecessors in blending the hermeneutic techniques appropriate to the realms of religion and philosophy.

The 'Arrogance' of Esoteric Interpretation

It can be said that all interpretation is arrogance, insofar as, limiting the possible range of significations of a given text to a single one, the reader overwrites the author in the moment of reading: 'It is remarkable that involuntarily we always read as superior beings.'[73] Plotinus' esotericist approach to Plato and the tradition takes this dynamic a step further than simple reading, in a manner shared by many esoteric interpretative traditions. In positing a hidden wisdom in a set of texts and then seeking to explicate it, there is of course the arrogance inherent in the position of having found the singular privileged reading. But there is the further assumption that the interpreter, and notionally his audience themselves, stand in the privileged category of readers *worthy* of understanding the hidden message, and moreover that the publication of this explication, which should theoretically oppose the secretive aims of the original esoteric author, is a legitimate undertaking.

This arrogance can take many forms, and be 'managed' by various rhetorical caveats. The rhetorics surrounding published secrets in the Greek magical papyri constitute a case in point; the circle of readership in this case is presented as a protectively limited group of those 'in the know'.[74] Publication of the secrets is thus notionally removed from the purview of the profane, but we have no evidence that these texts were genuinely kept from public consumption. In cases of published secrecy like the Derveni papyrus (discussed page 53), the fact of the text's immolation probably does indicate an instance of genuine circumscription of its possible audience; that is, it may genuinely have been a secret text, rather than 'secret knowledge' for public consumption (although the burning of the text may have also had a ritual purpose quite different from that of concealment).

Similarly, the motif of the oath or adjuration to secrecy in various forms is not unknown in Platonist texts, usually based on a similar logic of a select readership, and probably partly inspired by the command of the Second Platonic Epistle to destroy the text after having read it. Porphyry's *Philosophy from Oracles* began with the statement that the subjectmatter ought

[73] Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted at Bloom 2005, 48.
[74] See Betz 1995.

to be hidden since it is 'the most unspeakable of unspeakable matters' (Ταῦτά μοι ὡς ἀρρήτων ἀρρητότερα κρύπτειν ...).[75] Julian begins his oration *On the Mother of the Gods* by asking himself whether he ought to write about secret matters (ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀρρήτων) and reveal that which should not be revealed (τὰ ἀνεξοίστα), and then proceeds to do so at length.[76] The mystical terminology used here will have served to flag the subsequent text as 'secret knowledge'. The opening sentence of Marinus' biography of his teacher Proclus is another example of the appeal to silence which is immediately broken: Marinus, contemplating the greatness of the philosopher, suggests that, 'It would seem best to me to keep silence . . . ', before embarking on a verbose and detailed account of Proclus' life and doings.[77]

We might compare these examples with a more philosophically phrased instance from Plotinus' Treatise 39, which nonetheless says much the same thing: having delivered a long apophatic passage on the One, relentlessly removing it from the realm of predication and describability (Sections 7–10), he asks:

> But this 'non-reality', what is it? We must leave the matter and be silent, and, with our thought at a loss, assert that we must search no further.[78]

The rest of the treatise, of course, 'searches further' in its attempts to say the unsayable. The motif of the 'secret revealed' flagged by protestations that the author had better keep silent, is only the most obvious indicator that a Platonist author is in fact in an untenable position as exegete, if the claims to secrecy are taken as having logical, rather than rhetorical, force.

The Platonist stance as exegetes of esoteric ancients is a position implying published secrecy, and every act of reading an enigma or other text read esoterically is in a sense an act of arrogance. A modern example is the Platonic reading of the Tübingen school, who claim to have decoded the metaphysical doctrines hidden within Plato's dialogues; the caveat for this betrayal is presumably the unspoken assumption that, whatever Plato's reasons for having hidden his true doctrines, they are no longer valid, or do not apply to the *Tübingenschule* and their readership.[79]

Platonism has a unique perspective on this problem of dissemination due to the Platonic literary insistence on orality as the preferred means

[75] Ap. Euseb. *PE* IV.8.2.
[76] *Orat.* VIII 1, 158d.
[77] Marinus, *Procl.*, trans. Edwards 2000, 58.
[78] VI.8[39]11.1–3.
[79] See Appendix D, p. 270.

of transmission and the complementary dangers of written publication. Plotinus is portrayed as having struggled with this problem. As discussed in Chapter 2, Porphyry's accounts of his oath to keep the doctrines of Ammonius Saccas secret, which the *Enneads* betrayed, and of his hesitation to publish at all should be understood as 'silent philosopher' themes with parallels in many documents of the third century and earlier. Fundamentally, the Platonist philosopher as exegete of the hidden will always be guilty of the arrogance of interpretation if judged by his own stated rules: indeed, it is only when the subject is broken off on account of mystic or philosophic secrecy, a practice of the esoteric that we have seen in Plato, Plutarch and elsewhere, that one could posit a literal-minded respect for the secrets of Platonist wisdom. But esoteric silence is never literal silence, but always a statement of secrecy, a revealing of a hiding.

However, it should be emphasised that Plotinus' discourse, while often giving short shrift to ideas which the philosopher considers foolish, and, in the case of the Gnostics, reacting with a certain haughtiness to their behaviour and teachings, does not come across as 'arrogant'. Plotinus' relationship with Plato and the tradition which he constructs pre-dating Plato is not a pretence of respect concealing a desire to plunder and pervert; it is a creative, genuine desire to read, understand and explain. That Plotinus would wish to explain the secrets of Plato in written form is a notional betrayal which, I will argue below, is defused by the Plotinian notion of the ineffable transcendent, the self-hiding secret *par excellence*. Insofar as Plotinus *can* guide a reader toward the ontological truth (and note that this is different from 'the truth about ontology', as Chapter 6 will discuss), that reader will have *ipso facto* proved himself worthy of initiation into the mysteries. The Conclusion will return to this paradoxical 'openness' in Plotinus' discourse.

Creative Misinterpretation

Plotinus' reading of tradition should also not be seen as simple 'fabrication' in the derogatory sense.[80] Not only imaginative lineages like the Platonist perennial tradition, but all traditions, literary, cultural, philosophic, or religious, are creative negotiations with an imagined past. Whether or not historical analysis recognises the tradition's existence as genuine or historical, its reality to its interpreters is the only meaningful criterion of

[80] Cf. Struck 2004, 16: 'We can be sure that *no* reader (ancient or modern) understands himself or herself as foisting ideas onto a text that do not belong there.'

validity, and the interpretation itself the only 'existence' the tradition could ever have.[81] From a certain point of view, the Plotinian tradition may be seen as a 'false' or constructed lineage, but this position itself gives rise to difficulties.

While the procedures of philosophy, with their emphasis on active engagement with source material, put limits on the scope of interpretation, these limits are easy to see in their broad outlines, but difficult to pinpoint in detail. To argue for an 'essential' Platonism is to forget that the Old Academy, the sceptical Academy, Late Platonism and even Patristic and esoteric Islamic and Jewish traditions are in part developments of the same textual and oral tradition, the Platonic. Whether we consider Plotinus' developments of this tradition to be creative interpretation or creative misinterpretation is to a large degree a question of our own construal of what Platonism should be, or of what Plato really meant.[82] Scholars of Platonism are thus often guilty of their own arrogance of interpretation in reading Late Platonist doctrines and finding novelties or distortions in them. Augustine, an acute reader with no stake in defending Plotinus' 'orthodoxy' as a philosopher, saw him as so faithful to Plato's doctrines as to be like 'Plato reborn'.[83]

But we are still justified in addressing what we know were controversial doctrines in Plotinus' own time with a view to seeing the process of creative (mis)interpretation in its historical context.[84] We can see tensions in the *Enneads* where it is clear that Plotinus is straining the fabric of the tradition in a direction he feels it must tend.

Scholars have noted several important tensions within the philosophic tradition, the dynamics of which informed Plotinian Platonism. To begin with, viewing the Platonic writings as a univocal expository corpus, without development of thought, demands some degree of mental gymnastics.[85] The task of harmonising Aristotle and Plato was another such tension, whose dynamics echo through the *Enneads* and the whole history of Late Platonism. The ontological reading of the Platonic *Parmenides*, discussed in the following chapter, can also be read as a 'creative (mis)interpretation' with deep importance for Plotinus and his successors.

[81] Cf. Bloom 2005, 56: 'There are weak mis-readings and strong mis-readings . . . but there are no right readings, because reading a text is necessarily the reading of a whole system of texts, and meaning is always wandering around between texts.'

[82] Cf. Charrue 1978, 11.

[83] *Contra Ac.* 3.41 *ad fin.*

[84] Cf. comments on 'fortuitous mistranslation' at Wilson 1995, 307.

[85] Cf. Rist 1961, 163–4. Cf. Plutarch's reading of the Plato cited p. 76.

All of these philosophical situations were given premises for Plotinus; all of them gave rise to fascinating movements in his thought as he negotiated the terrain of the tradition.

Plotinus' negotiation of this exegetic terrain has been studied from many points of view.[86] The current discussion can only point to esoteric reading as a powerful strategy for such negotiation. The myth of the *Timaeus* was especially problematic for Plotinus, involving as it does, on the face of it, a creation of the world in time and a positive view of matter, two doctrines to which Plotinus was opposed. Esoteric interpretation allows him to explain how Plato's myth really tells a Plotinian story, even if he sometimes finds his own reading far-fetched.[87] Similarly, in Treatise 15, *On Our Allotted Guardian Spirit*, the 'Myth of Er' from Plato's *Republic* speaks in enigma; Plato's real meaning in referring to a 'choice' of guardian spirit in the other world is not αἵρεσις but προαίρεσις, not 'choice' but 'purpose', thus allowing Plotinus to avoid any haphazardness in the world of intellect, and other philosophic consequences for the soul's freedom in this world.[88] A similar process is at work when Plotinus corrects the Ancients and brings them into line with the true philosophic doctrine: at IV.7[2].8(4).3-5. Plotinus argues against the doctrine, attributed to the Pythagoreans (notably in Plato's *Phædo*), that the soul is a harmony, arguing that Pythagoras could have never in fact meant that the soul was a harmony in the sense of a perishable structure made up of multiple elements. He thus saves Pythagoras for Platonism. Esoteric reading was one of the interpretative keys which allowed for this kind of reading 'against the grain'. Functionally, the supposition of an esoteric wisdom hidden beneath the surface of a tradition opens the gates of interpretation; one is no longer limited to the overt meaning, and an author may in fact mean the *opposite* of what he says.

[86] See generally Dillon 1992. On tensions between Platonic and Aristotelean thinking in Late Platonism, see Karamanolis 2006.

[87] III.6[1]19.25 ff.

[88] III.4[46]5.1 ff., citing Pl. *R.* X 620d8–e1.

PART II

The Transcendent Absolute, the Ineffable and Plotinian Poetics of Transcendence

CHAPTER 5

The Development of the Transcendent Absolute in the Middle Platonist Milieu

> Τὸν μὲν οὖν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦ παντὸς εὑρεῖν τε ἔργον καὶ εὑρόντα εἰς πάντας ἀδύνατον λέγειν.
>
> Pl. *Ti.* 28c 3–5.

In the first centuries CE, a remarkable conceptual evolution occurs in Græco–Roman thought: across a wide spectrum of the evidence which has come down to us, both philosophical and religious, we find an increasing intellectual commitment to a totally transcendent first principle or god.[1] This is not to say that Greek thought before this time had always emphasised the ontological 'proximity' or epistemological availability of the nature of the first principle or of the true nature of reality or being. For Plato, truth, especially truth about the most basic realities, might be very difficult indeed to find and communicate: 'To discover the maker and father of the all is no mean task, and, having found him, to speak of him to all people is impossible.'[2] Nevertheless, Greek thinking up to the first centuries CE, including the work of Plato, shows a great commitment to the elucidatory power of *logos*, with all the complex nuances of discriminatory ability, articulate language, coherent argument and the capacity to give an account of reality which this term invoked; even Scepticism relied on opposing accounts (ἀντικείμενοι λόγοι) in its attacks on the accounts (λόγοι) given by philosophers.[3] With the rise of strong notions of transcendence in first- and second-century world-views we see this confidence begin to erode.

The Rise of the Ineffable Transcendent

Following the logic of transcendence to its conclusion, as Plotinus attempts to do, as it were automatically gives rise to ineffability; that which is beyond

[1] O'Meara 1998, 146–7; cf. Festugière 1981, IV; Mortley 1986, II, 17 *et passim*.
[2] *Ti.* 28c 3–5, cited in n. 1.
[3] Mortley 1986, 33–37.

all qualities is 'by nature' beyond the ability of words to comprehend.[4] But in Middle Platonist discourse, found in such thinkers as Alcinoüs, Celsus, Numenius and Plutarch, and among such Neopythagoreans as Moderatus and Pseudo-Brontinus, a process may be discerned in which authors, taking the *theoretical* transcendence of their first principle as a matter of course, have not developed *literary* tools with which to deal with its consequent ineffability and paradoxicality.[5] The bulk of the present chapter is a compressed historical survey of the rise of the idea of transcendence in the Middle Platonist milieu, concentrating on the effort to express the inexpressible nature of this reality in writing.

The discussion begins, however, by proposing two theoretical considerations with significance for Plotinian silence. Firstly, a model of 'strong' and 'weak' transcendence is outlined, through which the different literary options available to philosophers of transcendence can be characterised. There follows a theoretical model, more purely philosophical than literary, of 'indirect modes of knowing', whereby writers, removing their first principle from the field of the knowable (and thus of course of the sayable), posit alternative means of approach.

Interestingly, it is in the realm of Platonising *religion* that we find pre-Plotinian examples both of stronger transcendence and apophasis on the one hand, and transcendent ways of knowing on the other, and so this chapter will also discuss the rise of the concept of the transcendent in the *Hermetica* and Gnostic texts, in the *Chaldæan Oracles* and in the fascinating Philo Judaeus. The first centuries CE saw a popularisation of Platonist ideas, especially in the religious field. Certain concepts, such as a divinised or hypostasised *nous* (or several such), a hierarchically ordered cosmos of incrementally decreasing reality or goodness and an immortal, immaterial soul separate in essence from the body, form a *koinê* in certain religio-philosophic texts dating from this time.

It should thus be kept in mind in what follows that, while 'Middle Platonism' and 'Middle Platonists' are taken to refer to the group of philosophic thinkers discussed in Chapter 3, 'Middle Platonist' is to be taken in a broader sense, to indicate any intellectual current of the period from about the beginning of the first century to about the end of the second century CE in which the basic cosmological and anthropological ideas mentioned above are found. As increasingly highlighted by recent Plotinian

[4] See Rist 1964b, 69; Sells 1994, 3–4.

[5] Differences between Plotinian and Middle Platonic theories of transcendence have been widely noted (e.g. Majercik 1989, 5–6; Bechtle 1999, 86–88); my approach differs in that it locates an important difference not primarily in theory, but in literary technique.

scholarship, only a discussion of the Middle Platonist milieu in its broadest sense, taking into account not only Neopythagorean speculations but also Platonising religious currents, can provide the necessary background to Plotinus' conception and deployment of philosophical silence regarding the One beyond being.

'Strong' and 'Weak' Transcendence

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term 'transcendence' most relevantly as: 'Of the Deity: The attribute of being above and independent of the universe; distinguished from immanence'.[6] This definition presents itself as unproblematic, but its philosophical implications, if unpacked, might turn the definition against itself. We might, for example, logically question the idea of predicating any such attribute as 'transcendence', or any distinction from 'immanence', to a transcendent reality. Or we might question how something independent of the universe could be described at all using language which originates within the universe, since such a language will be ontologically posterior to the reality we are trying to describe. We might also enquire as to what relevance the notions of identity implicit in 'the Deity' might have for a truly transcendent entity (immediately questioning the term 'entity' itself in this context). Transcendence, then, militates against straightforward linguistic presentation.

On the conceptual level, transcendence seems to be an either-or proposition which does not admit of degrees. But on the level of written practice, a range of strategies may be employed which highlight the alterity of the transcendent. These strategies result in some form of self-denying or paradoxical language, or in conceptual dissonances that go unresolved. Michael Sells discusses degrees of 'performative intensity' in apophatic discourse, defined as 'a function of the frequency and seriousness with which the language turns back upon its own propositions';[7] there is just such a range of intensity in philosophic treatments of the transcendent absolute to be found in the development of Platonism. Apophatic language is one technique through which philosophers approach the problem of writing the transcendent; others are discussed below.

The relevant criterion here is one of performativity; the dictionary definition cited at the beginning of this section is an example of very weak

[6] *S.v.* 1b.

[7] Sells 1994, 3: 'A mere statement that God is ineffable, followed by a list of attributes of God, and ending with a reminder that God is ineffable serves as an example of the low end of the spectrum of intensity, while at the high end we find the true apophatic discourse, with all its employment of paradox, self-negation, and other discursive measures which attack normal predication.'

transcendence. By 'weak transcendence' is meant any statement presenting the idea of transcendence – with the essential notion of radical otherness conceived of as superiority – which does not pursue, or does not pursue fully, the logical consequences of transcendence, especially as they relate to *the act of making statements about it*. Any speech-act of strong transcendence, by contrast, will be in some degree self-reflexive and self-critical concerning its own truth-value. A statement of transcendence is never complete, always constituting a promise rather than a manifestation. But it may approach the ever-absent fulfilment to a greater or lesser extent through its performance; hence, strong and weak transcendence.

Indirect Modes of Knowing, Direct Modes of Unknowing

The quotation from Plato's *Timaeus* at the beginning of the present chapter, a favourite locus for Middle and Late Platonist authors, suggests two levels of epistemological difficulty: firstly the difficulty of knowledge of the transcendent, and then the further difficulty of expressing this knowledge. Plotinus goes beyond Plato in this regard; for him, the impossibility of expressing the nature of the highest, not only to the 'mass of men' but even to a philosophical elite, is an axiom, and is accompanied by a corresponding impossibility of knowledge itself.[8] As Mortley's work documents in detail, the decline in confidence in *logos* led to a range of alternative modes of epistemology in late antiquity.[9] Analysing the modes specific to Middle Platonism will help to make sense of the dynamics and internal paradoxes of the ways in which Plotinus, having denied expression *and cognition* of the transcendent, nevertheless writes about it at length.

The Middle Platonist milieu, in distancing its transcendent principle from normal modes of cognition, brings to bear several distinct theories (and written practices) of 'indirect knowing', and, beyond these, of something else, something which is direct, but which is not knowing. This nameless faculty or philosophic achievement is nevertheless universally located at the top of the epistemological hierarchy; while it takes the form of a kind of superconsciousness or ineffable apprehension, rather than of knowledge or thought, it makes sense to discuss it in terms of modes of knowing, as the lower stages of philosophic cognition are depicted as being aimed at, or having their final fruition in, such a mode. For the sake of clarity, I have anatomised these modes into four main types, representing a range of possibilities adopted in varying ways by different authors.

[8] See p. 205 ff. in the following chapter.
[9] See especially Mortley 1986.

1. Discursive Indirect Knowing

Platonists generally recognise that certain methods of reasoning – induction and negative dialectic, for example – can give us some, necessarily incomplete, idea of the nature of the first principle. These methods are discursive – that is, they deal in concepts – and can approach the transcendent reality only obliquely, a limitation we have seen above applied by Plotinus to his own use of negative language.[10] The terms *dianoia* and *logismos* and their cognates apply to this type of thinking. These methods of reasoning specialise in telling us what the transcendent is *not.*

One widespread reason for placing such limitations on discursive thought is the common Hellenic maxim that 'like is only known by like', which has a pervasive presence in Greek thought both within and outside philosophy proper;[11] the human mind could comprehend the transcendent only if it were itself transcendent. The more characteristically Platonist critique of thinking as 'discursive', and thus necessarily indirect (implying a thinker and a thought, and therefore lacking unity) is a philosophic concern, and should not necessarily be read into the religious texts quoted below, which nevertheless level similar criticisms of incompleteness and limitation against everyday modes of thinking.

2. Non-discursive Direct Knowing

A non-discursive mode of knowing may be theorised, superior to discursive modes, because consisting in direct apprehension of the known by the knower. The high status given to *noêsis* is universal in Middle Platonism, in which *noêsis*, however defined by individual authors, is privileged as pertaining to *nous*, conceived of as a hypostatic reality of a high order. For some authors, as we will see, *noêsis* constitutes a direct mode of knowing the transcendent absolute; these tend to be the same authors who see this reality as itself being *nous.*

3. Non-discursive Indirect Knowing

Plotinus' conception of noetic non-discursivity will be unpacked in some detail in Chapter 6, but in the present context we may simply point out that, for Plotinus, while *noêsis* represents a truly direct way of knowing realities, it cannot directly apprehend the first principle, which is beyond *nous*

[10] P. 6.

[11] In the Platonist tradition see e.g. Pl. *Ti.* 45c with Arist. *de an.* 4046ff; Pl. *Smp*. 195b5, where Agathon presents the doctrine that 'like always stays close to like' as a παλαιὸς λόγος; Pl. *Phd.* 79e6–7, the 'affinity argument'; Arist. *Metaph.* 1000b; Alcinoüs XIV.2; Num. Fr. 2 ll. 3–4; Ph. *de gig.* 9; Plot. VI.9[9]11. See Mortley 1975, 369–370.

and unintelligible (ἀνοητός). For authors, such as Plotinus, who take this view[12] we have a faculty of 'non-discursive *indirect* knowing' with regard to the transcendent; while serving as the mode of direct knowing *par excellence* at the level of entities, beyond that level *noêsis* cannot penetrate.

4. Direct Unknowing

Some authors present other, truly direct, modes of approach to the transcendent; these may be described in terms of 'vision' or other verbs of sensing or of contact, of *gnôsis*, or of another ability or philosophic action (sometimes extending to ritual actions, whose efficacy is independent of discursive content). It is difficult to know what to call these modes of approach; they are often presented as being, themselves, ineffable, a wide range of apophatic techniques may be employed to delineate these modes from their cousins – *noêsis* and the like – and they are often accompanied by the rhetorics of silence and of secrecy.

In the discussion that follows these modes will be termed 'direct unknowing' because, while descriptions of them privilege metaphors of contact, unity and ineffability, and tend to deny 'knowing' in any normal sense of the term, they nevertheless occupy structurally the top of the hierarchy of modes of knowing (from discursive to non-discursive and finally transcending knowing itself). While they may be from time to time characterised as forms of knowledge, this is never anything except one of a range of partial metaphors used to attempt to signify an ineffable act conceived of as transcending the written text. The awkwardness and paradoxicality of the term 'direct unknowing' serves to flag the elusive character of the (non)phenomena in question, which tend to evade definition even as they are privileged above the defining mind and even intellect.

The Development of the Transcendent in Platonist Thought

While much excellent work has been done on the concept of the transcendent in Middle Platonism, somewhat less attention has been given to the precise ways in which the Middle Platonists tended to respond rhetorically to the situation of a formally transcendent first principle. Two points should be made here, grounded in the concepts of weak and strong transcendence and indirect knowing outlined above. Firstly, while the ineffability of the transcendent first principle is indeed 'un

[12] E.g. V.1[10]6.12 ff; VI.7[38]15, 16; V.3[49]11; III.8[51]8.31.

lieu commun' among Middle Platonists,[13] the surviving evidence presents us with no sustained example of the writing of strong transcendence which Plotinus and his successors practised.[14] Secondly, these philosophers are generally much more optimistic than Plotinus concerning modes of indirect knowing; while sometimes showing cognisance of the potential problems inherent in any epistemology of transcendence, the Middle Platonists can be said (with possible exceptions discussed below) to posit incomplete, but relatively unproblematic, discursive methods, and non-discursive methods with some direct connection to the transcendent principle.

Before discussing the Middle Platonists, however, it should be noted that a transcendent conception of the first principle may well have been taken up by Speusippus, Plato's immediate successor to the leadership of the Academy; it is at any rate certain that the lack of surviving texts by Speusippus is a significant gap in our knowledge of the development of the Platonist transcendent.[15] From the extant testimonia, it is clear that Speusippus posits a 'one' which is formally beyond essence and which, in many respects, resembles the first principles which begin to appear in the writings of first and second century Platonists.[16] Proclus says, in a text surviving in Latin translation, that Speusippus and the *antiqui* (a usage which we may take as translating παλαιοί or ἀρχαῖοι, and generally taken to refer here to the Old Academy) held that the One was 'superior to being, and that from which being [arises], and they delivered it even from the status of being a principle.'[17] Sadly, nothing survives of Speusippus which might give us clues as to his negative literary method.[18] Relevant in the immediate context, however, is the fact that the Late Platonists knew Speusippus and quoted him in the context of the ontology of the *Parmenides* as a forerunner of their metaphysics.[19]

[13] O'Meara 1998, 146–147; cf. Casel 1919, 94–95; Whittaker 1969c, 368 n. 4; Mortley 1986, II, 17.

[14] Cf. Bechtle 1999, 86–88; O'Meara 1998, 146–147.

[15] On Speusippus Dillon 2003, 30–88 is an excellent general discussion.

[16] Arist. *Metaph*. XII 1072b30, XIV 1091a30, XIV 1092a9. See Merlan 1970, 31–32; Mortley 1986, I, 134.

[17] VII. 501.4-9 Steel = Speusippus fr. 48 Táran. Cf. Arist. *Metaph*. 1083a22.

[18] Cf. Mortley 1986, I, 134.

[19] Only one direct quotation from Speusippus in the *Enneads* is noted by Henry and Schwyzer (Fr. 30, cited at I.2[19]6.13), but Speusippus' doctrine of the One seems cognate to that of Plotinus on the basis of our scanty evidence: so Dodds 1928, 129–42, esp. 140 with n. 5; Merlan 1970, 31. We might thus speculate that other citations of Speusippus would be found in the *Enneads* if we possessed Speusippus' works.

Strong and Weak Transcendence in Middle Platonism

The *Didaskalikos* of Alcinoüs (probably the second century CE, though possibly as late as the third)[20] furnishes our strongest surviving example of Middle Platonist theoretical transcendence.[21] Alcinoüs introduces his section on theology thus: 'We must next discuss the third principle [third, that is, in order of discussion, after matter and the forms], which Plato declares to be more or less beyond description. However, we might arrive by induction at some notion of it in the following fashion.'[22] Alcinoüs states that this principle is unsayable and graspable only by *nous*, because it/he has no attributes, being neither good nor bad, nor indifferent.[23] He is clearly making an attempt to remove the first principle from the range of normal predications, and shows some recognition of the consequences of his conception for discourse with his use of the neither this nor its opposite, nor a third, middle term 'trope', a variation on the basic apophatic unit discussed in Chapter 1.[24]

Wolfson suggests[25] that when Alcinoüs and later Platonists say that the first principle is 'unsayable', they are employing negation (ἀπόφασις) in the sense defined by Aristotle, rather than privation (στέρησις), by which latter term Aristotle indicates what is termed 'negation' in more conventional parlance.[26] To Aristotle, a negation is not considered a predicate, because it asserts nothing about its object except that it is not something. A privation, by contrast, implies its opposite: to say that one had a good day implies that a bad day was a possibility. Negation in this technical sense does not mean that the opposite of the predicate can be applied to the ineffable reality so described; instead, 'it rather means the exclusion of God from the universe of discourse of the predicate in question'.[27]

This Aristotelean distinction helps make sense of what Alcinoüs is doing in following a statement of the One's ineffability with a chain of attributes; if the primary god is indeed 'ineffable' it cannot also be 'eternal, ineffable,

[20] On this dating, see Whittaker in Alcinoüs 1990, xii–xiii; Dillon in Alcinoüs 1993, xii–xiii.
[21] References to this text are to the Budé edition of Whittaker (1990).
[22] X.164 7–8. Translation Dillon (1993), *ad loc.*
[23] X.4 = 165.5-13 H: Ἄρρητος δ' ἐστὶ καὶ νῷ μόνῳ ληπτός ... ἀλλ' οὐδὲ συμβέβηκέ τι αὐτῷ, οὔτε κακόν· οὐ γὰρ θέμις τοῦτο εἰπεῖν· οὔτε ἀγαθόν· κατὰ μετοχὴν γάρ τινος ἔσται οὕτως καὶ μάλιστα ἀγαθότητος οὔτε ἀδιάφορον κτλ.
[24] P. 25.
[25] See Wolfson 1952, 120–121; 1957, 145–146. Cf. Mortley 1986, II, 57.
[26] Arist. *Metaph.* IV 2 1004a, 14–16; IV 6 1011b 18 ff.; X 5 1056a 15–18.
[27] Wolfson 1957, 146. Cf. Mortley 1975, 373–375.

self-perfect', and the rest,[28] unless these attributes are understood in this special sense.[29] It should be noted that the attributes used by Alcinoüs are all either alpha-privative adjectives, or modified after they are stated in a semi-apophatic manner, and Alcinoüs insists that he is not attempting to 'circumscribe' or 'define' (χωρίζων) the reality he is discussing. Alcinoüs' comment, then, that the first principle is 'more or less beyond description' may be taken as a shorthand for an understanding that certain seeming predicates are not really predicates, but rather forms of 'unsaying'.

To the Aristotelean term 'apophasis' the Platonists, from Alcinoüs on,[30] generally prefer the term 'aphairesis', but with the same meaning of 'removal' of concepts rather than predication of concepts.[31] Although, technically, Plotinus would for the most part call the examples of negation noted above cases of aphairesis (ἀφαιρέσεις),[32] I use the terms apophasis (as defined on page 25) and aphairesis to refer to specific methods pursued by Plotinus, discussed on page 213 ff.; they should be regarded as terms of art in this book.

The Aristotelean background of Alcinoüs' negative method and the methods of indirect and direct knowing which he posits, discussed below, show a standard response to the problems of transcendence. We note that, for all the emphasis on negation, Alcinoüs' literary method is quite conventional in this passage; with the understanding that certain attributes lie outside the realm of formal predication, he is happy to employ them liberally and relatively unproblematically. In contrast, we will see strong expressions of transcendence in Plotinus which negate the One beyond being, and then deny these very negations. Alcinoüs' Chapter 10 also sits like an island of negations in a sea of conventional positive formulations; Plotinus' acts of unsaying go on and on, sometimes even crossing the boundaries between treatises in extended exercises of unsaying. Alcinoüs'

[28] X.164.33–34: Καὶ μὴν ὁ πρῶτος θεὸς ἀΐδιός ἐστιν, ἄρρητος, αὐτοτελὴς τουτέστιν ἀπροσδεής, ἀειτελὴς τουτέστιν ἀεὶ τέλειος, παντελὴς τουτέστι πάντη τέλειος· θειότης, οὐσιότης, ἀλήθεια, συμμετρία, ἀγαθόν. Λέγω δὲ οὐχ ὡς χωρίζων ταῦτα, ἀλλ' ὡς κατὰ πάντα ἑνὸς νοουμένου. Καὶ ἀγαθὸν μέν ἐστι, διότι πάντα εἰς δύναμιν εὐεργετεῖ, παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ αἴτιος ὤν.

[29] Cf. Dillon 1993, 103.

[30] *Didask*. 165 H l. 17.

[31] Wolfson 1952, 120–121; Schroeder 1996, 337. On the Platonic and Middle Platonist history of aphairesis, see Wolfson 1952; Hadot 1981; Mortley 1986, I, 134–136. Scholars have seen Alcinoüs' adoption of this term as arising from sources as disparate as Euclid (Wolfson 1952) and Neopythagoreanism (Whittaker 1969b). The term ἀποφάσις would again come into use in the Athenian School of Proclus (Mortley 1986, II, 86).

[32] As at e.g. VI.7[38]36.7. But note that at V.5[32]6 Plotinus uses the term ἀπόφασις (28) and the verbal ἀποφήσῃ (32) in the sense of 'negation', *pace* Wolfson.

account of the first principle is thus an example of a relatively weak expression of transcendence in systematic form.

Alcinoüs' account has come down to us in an unusually good state of preservation; many of the writings of Middle Platonist philosophy are by contrast lost. As far as the limited evidence extends, however, other authors of the period give comparable, if less systematic, accounts of the transcendent first principle. Maximus of Tyre (second century CE) tells us that the divine *nous*, his first principle, exceeds the powers of the senses or of speech to comprehend,[33] but presents a relatively weak transcendence; the philosopher is able to grasp the nature of the first principle through a more or less standard course of Platonist *via eminentiae*, and there is little emphasis on this principle's remoteness or unsayability.[34] Plutarch speaks of τὸ μὴ φατὸν μηδὲ ῥητὸν ἀνθρώποις κάλλος, the ineffable beauty of god;[35] we might translate the last four words as a statement of Platonist elitism ('not to be told to the many') or as an absolute statement of the limits of language ('not expressible by humankind'). In either case, the statement does not result in a great deal of strong language of transcendence in Plutarch, and is practically unique in his extensive work.

Among Latin writers, Calcidius, writing in the fourth century CE but probably basing his account on a Middle Platonist source, describes Plato's supreme god as 'the highest good, and beyond every substance and every nature, and greater than reason or intellect …'[36] and leaves the matter there. Apuleius of Madaura (fl. mid-second century CE) makes several statements of the deity's ineffability.[37] In the *On the God of Socrates* he attributes this ineffability to the paucity of human language,[38] and in his *On Plato* he says, with a nod to our ever-recurring lines from Plato's *Timaeus*, that god is 'not bounded by place nor time nor any force, so that he is comprehensible to few, sayable to none'.[39] This interesting author does, however, import themes of mystic silence in a way which foreshadows the approach common to Late Platonism, an approach otherwise unexampled among surviving Middle Platonists.

[33] *Orat.* 11.9.204–5.

[34] On the *via eminentiae*, see n. 56.

[35] *De Is.* 393a.

[36] *In Tim.* 176, p. 204 5 ff. Waszink: *qui est summum bonum ultra omnem substantiam omnemque naturam, aestimatione intellectuque melior …* ; see Whittaker 1969a, 92.

[37] See discussion Festugière 1981, IV 102–109.

[38] *Soc.* III.124: [Plato] praedicet hunc [deorum parentem] solum maiiestatis incredibili quadam nimietate et ineffabili non posse penuria sermonis humani quavis oratione vel modice conprehendi.

[39] *De Plat.* I.5 … *neque loco neque tempore neque vice ulla comprehensus eoque paucis cogitabilis, nemini effabilis* (cf. *Tim.* 28c3–5). Cf. Apul. *Apol.* 64.7: *paucis cogitabilis, nemini effabilis.*.

We might expect a strongly transcendent first principle from Numenius of Apamea (fl. c. 150 CE),[40] whose system of thought had so much in common with Plotinus'; unfortunately the surviving fragments do not give enough evidence for us to make such a judgement. Numenius strongly distances the first god, the Good, from any sensory or spatial attributes, and seemingly places it beyond essence.[41] He regards it as a transcendent aspect of intellect (frr. 16, 17, 20; cf. 21), a *nous* which precedes *nous* (fr. 17).[42] But nothing survives of Numenius which could be characterised as a strong expression of transcendence.

It is even more dangerous to speculate about the stylistic nuances of Celsus, whose *True Account* survives only in fragments quoted by the hostile Origen. It is clear that, in removing his first principle beyond the realms of intellect, of existence, and of real beings, Celsus placed it in a theoretical position of transcendence.[43] It is unlike any other form (VI.63.13–14: ὁ θεὸς οὔτ᾽ ἄλλῳ εἴδει οὐδενὶ ὅμοιος), which Frede takes to mean 'God does not have any qualities',[44] it has none of the characteristics we predicate to things (VI.62.13–14), and cannot be expressed in words (VII.42–43). Nevertheless, from the small amount of material which survives, there is no indication that Celsus explored the stronger side of transcendence beyond the employment of such negative descriptions, with the tantalising exception of positing a direct mode of ineffable apprehension, discussed below.

Modes of Knowing the Transcendent in Middle Platonism

A tradition of indirect discursive modes of knowing the first principle was current in Middle Platonism.[45] Alcinoüs describes a number of

[40] See Dillon 1977, 362 on Numenius' *floruit*. Translations of Numenius are from Petty's 2011 edition, which follows the numbering of Des Places' 1973 Budé edition.

[41] Fr. 2 ll. 13–14: ἐπὶ τῇ οὐσίᾳ seems to be a more flowery equivalent of the usual ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας of Pl. *Rep.* 509B 8–9.

[42] *Pace* Festugière (1981, IV, 127), who finds an intellectual first principle somehow alien to Numenius' 'essential thought' despite recognising the plain facts of the text. Perhaps Festugière was under the influence of Plotinus' extensive arguments as to why the first principle could not be an intellect, discussed in the next chapter.

[43] See Orig. *Cels*. VII.45.20–24 for a long negative definition of this principle, which, however, is not apophatic as I define the term. This and many of the metaphysical citations that follow are collected at Frede 1994, 5206.

[44] 1994, 5206. I would rather be tempted to speculate that Celsus had identified the first principle with the Form of the Good of the *Republic*, and was concerned to differentiate it from the other Forms; this is not however to say that such a Form would not be free of qualities in Celsus' thought.

[45] See generally Festugière 1981, IV , 79–132, with the useful summary at 136–137; Dörrie 1960, 213–214; Krämer 1964, 105–108.

technical methods of reasoning, well discussed by Festugière:[46] we have seen *induction* (ἐπαγωγή) recommended for attaining some indirect idea of the first principle. Alcinoüs expands on the specific methods which this entails: the negative method of *abstraction* of attributes (ἀφαίρησις)[47] (a method which we will see transformed by Plotinus), *analogy* (ἀναλογία),[48] and a third method, usually known as the *via eminentiae*. Celsus recommends synthesis, analysis and analogy for approaching the ultimate reality indirectly.[49] While these two authors furnish the main surviving programmatic methodological statements about these modes of knowing,[50] we find them in wide use in Middle Platonist writing; the examples of negative attributions given above may furnish one case in point, which would fit easily under the method of 'removal' propounded by Alcinoüs, or that of 'analysis' propounded by Celsus,[51] and the characteristically Platonist *via eminenti*ae is discussed below.

Of more concern to the present discussion are the non-discursive modes of knowing and whether they are conceived as being direct or not. As we have seen, Alcinoüs places his first principle within the reach of *noêsis*; he conceives of this principle as itself an exalted form of *nous*,[52] and so we would expect this. Maximus of Tyre also argues for a noetic god (11.8) and describes with some flourishes the means by which the philosopher, freeing himself from the senses and the world of matter, attains to knowledge of it through 'the noblest and purest and most intelligent and subtlest and most venerable aspect of the soul' which grasps it 'all at once in a single act of comprehension'.[53] Plutarch also emphasises the suddenness and 'singularity' of *noêsis* of the highest *nous*, in a passage replete with mystic terminology.[54] Both Plutarch's and Maximus' accounts contain narrative elements and rhetorical content drawn from the mysteries, to which the discussion will turn in approaching Plotinus' apophatic narratives of contact with the One beyond being. As for their characterisation of *noêsis* as an instantaneous, synoptic mode of cognition, Plotinus approaches this theory with a depth of scrutiny and subtlety not found in his predecessors,

[46] 1981, IV 92–132. Cf. Turner 2001, 486–488.
[47] X.165.16 ff.
[48] X.165.20 ff.
[49] Orig. Cels. VII.42. See Festugière 1981, 116–117; 122–123.
[50] But see also Numen. fr. 2 ll. 3–4.
[51] Cf. Max.Tyr. 11.11.
[52] X.164.18 ff. There is possible ambiguity here, but see Dillon 1993, 102–103.
[53] 11.9.205–8, trans. Trapp 1997, 103.
[54] Plu. *de Is.* 382 D-E. Cf. Numen. fr. 2 ll. 6–7.

resulting in a certain ineffability found already at the level of *nous* before the approach to the truly ineffable One.

The *via eminentiae*, the conceptual ascent, is the epistemological mode *par excellence* for approaching the absolute in Middle Platonism. In the *locus classicus*, the climactic speech of Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates describes the ascent, fuelled by *erôs,* from beautiful particulars to genera, and from genera finally to the beautiful itself, moving always toward the better from the worse, until the best is attained. He describes it, however, not in terms of his own erotic quest, but as an initiatory path which was described to him by the mysterious Diotima.[55] Such a path, in terms of Platonist understanding of modes of knowing, goes from the realm of discursive knowledge (particulars) to non-discursive knowledge (genera, Forms); this *anagôgê* might either stop there, in a system culminating in an intellect,[56] or pass beyond, in a system culminating in an ineffable principle beyond thought and being.

A *narration* of such a journey would remain on the level of discourse, but by *pursuing* such a journey the philosopher might theoretically attain to direct non-discursive knowledge of truths, or even pass beyond knowing into direct unknowing. In terms of the four categories outlined above, then, the *via eminentiae* as a literary device is an indirect, discursive *programme* for non-discursive awareness, or even its transcendence; this is a mode of knowing often presented in a distinctive narrative style, and one which promises more than it can itself deliver. Chapter 7 discusses both types of *via eminentiae* in Plotinus, characterised as discursive and practical aphairesis.

There are two accounts in the surviving Middle Platonist literature which seem to posit ineffable modes of direct unknowing. The first is from Numenius' lost work *On the Good.* Numenius says in fragment 17 that the first god is completely unknown among mankind; as with the quotation from Plutarch above, there may be some ambiguity here between the idea of absolute unknowability and the implication of an elite who can know. Numenius has Plato address humankind, informing them of another intellect beyond the demiurgic intellect which they know, one that is 'more august and more divine'.[57] In fragment 2 from the same work Numenius lays out a theory of knowledge more systematically. After a brief discussion

[55] *Smp.* 201d-212a; mystery initiation evoked at 209e5-210a2; the course of *anagôgê* described 210a4–212a7.

[56] Maximus of Tyre gives a well-known example of the genre, in which he attempts to demonstrate that god must be an intellect (11.8). Cf. Alcinoüs *Didask.* 10.165.10 ff.

[57] Cf. Festugière 1981, IV, 128–132.

of reasoning from analogies inherent in material objects, he rejects this or any equivalent method as a means of approach to the first god, here called 'the Good' (τἀγαθόν). Numenius indicates that contemplating number (τοὺς ἀριθμοὺς θεασαμένῳ) rather than sensibles will lead the aspirant beyond the lower forms of reasoning to something higher, and continues in a vein which has much in common with Plotinian passages describing both the contemplation of intellect and the ineffable contact with the One:

> In this way must one, after going far away from sense-objects, have converse with the Good, alone with the Alone (μόνῷ μόνον). There, where there is neither any person nor any living thing, no corporeal object large or small, but rather a divine solitude, absolutely indescribable and ineffable; there the abodes, pastimes and splendours of the Good are found, and the Good itself, the gentle, sovereign One, graciously seated above essence.[58]

Although it is removed from its broader context in the original work, we can be fairly confident in seeing in this passage a description of a direct mode of unknowing; the language of silence and secrecy, the negative description, albeit compressed and the lack of any verb 'to know' are tell-tale signs of this.

Celsus also seems to have propounded a transcendent apprehension beyond knowing. While placing the absolute beyond the reach of *nous* or any other form of knowing,[59] he speaks tantalisingly and paradoxically of 'a certain ineffable ability' by which the absolute might be intelligised.[60] Taken in its context, this *noêtos* cannot correspond to any form of *noêsis*; it would seem that Celsus is reaching toward a description of an ineffable knowledge-beyond-knowledge, or unknowing, which acts toward the god as *nous* does toward the intelligibles, but which takes the philosopher (and the reader) out of the purview of words, concepts, or *noêsis*.

Transcendence in 'Pythagoreanism'

To this account of Middle Platonist philosophy should be added that of the Pythago-rean, or Neopythagorean, materials current in the same

[58] Fr. 2 ll. 9–14. The striking 'alone with the Alone' is echoed by Plotinus at I.6[1]7.9; VI.9[11]51; V.1[10]6.11-12.

[59] *Ap.* Orig. *Cels.* VII.45.21-25: … ὅσπερ οὔτε νοῦς οὔτε νόησις οὔτ' ἐπιστήμη, ἀλλὰ νῷ τε τοῦ νοεῖν αἴτιος καὶ νοήσει τοῦ δι' αὐτο γιγνώσκειν καὶ νοητοῖς ἅπασι καὶ αὐτῇ ἀληθείᾳ καὶ αὐτῇ οὐσίᾳ τοῦ εἶναι, πάντων ἐπέκεινα ᾧν ….

[60] *Ibid.* VII.45.25: the first principle is ἀρρήτῳ τινὶ δυνάμει νοητός.

period.[61] The term Neopythagorean may be taken in what follows to refer to an intellectual *tendency* in antiquity – rather than a philosophical school – toward ontological speculation which privileged number as a fundamental reality and/or which posited a monad as the primordial reality.[62] The Pythagorean *bios* said to have typified the early Pythagorean sodalities was gone; in its place we find a metaphysical tendency. There is a separate question of definition and identity; philosophers could and did define themselves, or others, as Pythagorean, as we will see in the case of Numenius 'the Pythagorean'. In this context, however, 'Neopythagorean' becomes a modern misnomer: the term should be understood in what follows as referring to a speculative tendency rather than any consideration of identity. Pythagorean identity and mystique have been discussed in Chapter 2, but for the moment it is Neopythagorean speculation which concerns us. We may note here that there is no *a priori* proof that genuine Pythagoreans of the Classical period did not themselves hold 'Neopythagorean' doctrines;[63] the problematic evidence for these mysterious thinkers, however, makes it dangerous to speculate, and there is plenty of evidence that Platonists read properly Platonist doctrines back onto the Pythagorean tradition.[64]

Neopythagorean speculations played an important part in the formulation of ideas of the transcendent absolute.[65] The importance of Neopythagorean literature[66] for Middle Platonists is in some cases clear,

[61] The terminology here is problematic, because, if Burkert is right in seeing almost all surviving written evidence of early Pythagorean ideas (aside from that of Aristotle) as being filtered through a Platonist lens, virtually all Pythagoreanism is 'Neopythagoreanism', and the actual teachings of the historical figure Pythagoras and his school in the sixth century are not only lost to us, but were lost to ancient philosophers as well (argued at length at Burkert 1972, 15–90). This is by no means a closed issue, despite Burkert's massively erudite exposition; see e.g. Kingsley's arguments *contra* Burkert (Kingsley 1995, 317 ff.), which, however, do not materially affect the working definition outlined in the following discussion.

[62] It would be difficult to find more common features than these across Neopythagorean literature, a very heterogeneous genre or collection of genres. Cf. Whittaker 1969b, 98 n. 10.

[63] In a quotation preserved by Proclus, Speusippus seems to indicate that his doctrine of a totally transcendent monad is a Pythagorean teaching (see Dillon 2003, 42), a tantalising fragment which may attest to a Pythagorean transcendent One at a very early date. *In Prm.* Fr.48 Tarán, preserved in the medieval Latin of William of Moerbeke: Et ut Speusippus … *Le unum enim melius ente putantes et a quo le ens, et ab ea que secundum principium habitudine ipsum liberaverunt* [*sic*]. Cf. Aet. ap. Stob. I.29, who reports that Speusippus differentiated the One from *nous*.

[64] O'Meara 1989, 4–5.

[65] See generally Whittaker 1969b; Whittaker 1973, 78–83, esp. 78–79; Mortley 1986, II, 20. Cf. Armstrong 1967, 14.

[66] On this literature, see generally Thesleff 1961; Dillon 1977, 353; Festugière 1981, I, 15–16. A basic corpus is established by Thesleff's edition of 1965. These writings, most of which are lost, ranged over a large and varied number of genres and themes, including pseudepigrapha attributed to Pythagoras and others 'of his school' (see Casel 1919, 52–53; Thesleff 1961, 119, 202; Burkert 1972, 201), sacred

and in others may be considered a likelihood; we must take care, however, in making sharp distinctions between the two movements, which were already cognate in many ways from Plato's time onward, and which had, moreover, come to be strongly identified by some Platonists and 'Pythagoreans' alike in the first and seconds centuries.[67] Numenius is usually regarded as a Pythagorean by ancient commentators, but Proclus sees him as a Platonist.[68] Plotinus, too, was known by his contemporary Longinus as an 'expounder of Platonic and Pythagorean principles',[69] from which I think we are justified in concluding that certain of Plotinus' doctrines, most probably his teachings on the transcendent One and his thought on number, were seen as partaking of the Neopythagorean tendency. We know that Plotinus read the Neopythagorean works of Numenius, and his reference to poetic works of Pythagoras (which he finds unclear) shows that he had delved into the pseudepigraphic tradition; however, the complexities of this tradition make it impossible to say which works he might have known.[70]

The most important Neopythagorean conception for the present discussion is that of the One or monad, which Whittaker has argued had a primary role to play in the shaping of post-Hellenistic and late antique ideas about the transcendent absolute.[71] Neopythagorean theories of the One have been divided by Whittaker into two main types: (1) the One combining in itself opposing characteristics in a kind of *coincidentia oppositorum*, and (2) the One transcending these opposites entirely.[72] Whittaker gives examples from a range of evidence to link the idea of a first principle to which all attributes, even that of unity, are denied with Neopythagorean speculation, and considers the appearance of such concepts in Platonist authors and in texts such as the *Hermetica* to be signs of Neopythagorean influence.[73] In doing so, he may be pushing the source critical method further than it will go, but his work nevertheless makes it clear that some

hymns, treatises on number (Festugière 1981, I, 15–16; cf. Dillon 1977, 353), so-called *hieroi logoi* (see p. 58) and, of course, philosophical works, such as the writings of Numenius.

67 See p. 102.

68 Numenius the Pythagorean: Longinus ap. Porph. *Plot.* 20; Euseb. *PE* IX, 7, 1 = Numen. Fr. 1; Nemesius *de nat. hom.* 2, 6-14 = Numen. Fr. 4b; Orig. *Cels.* V.38 = Numen. Fr. 53. The Platonist: Procl. *In Tim.* III p. 33, 30 – p. 34, 1; 34, 6 Diehl; *In R.* II p. 96, 11.

69 Porph. *Plot.* 20.71–3.

70 See p. 130 on Plotinus' reception of the 'Pythagorean' poems. Merlan 1970, 84–88 summarises the textual issues.

71 Whittaker 1969b.

72 Whittaker 1973, 77 and ff.

73 *Ibid.* 78–82.

Neopythagorean authors were expounding doctrines of a transcendent monad in the first centuries CE.[74]

Moderatus of Gades (first century CE) tells us that, 'according to the Pythagoreans', there are three monads, the first of which he declares to be 'above being and every essence',[75] a quotation which some scholars have taken to be the first known reference to a 'One beyond being' in a broadly Middle Platonist milieu.[76] The lost *On Intellect and Thought* of Pseudo-Brontinus[77] is reported to have dealt with a monad which transcended both *nous* and being in power and seniority,[78] although we cannot say much more than this about it.[79] The so-called 'Theology of Arithmetic' is a surviving treatise on number, apparently culled from the work of Nicomachus of Gerasa and others. The section on the monad in this text provides many examples of the kind of paradoxical transcendence which Neopythagoreans of the first centuries CE were developing: the monad of the *Theologumena* generates the other numbers with no loss to itself (1, 6–8), and possesses in potentiality all the qualities manifested in the other numbers (1, 9 ff; 3, 2 ff.). Like the Plotinian One, it is thus the source of all, yet completely unmoved by and transcendent of all things.

A detailed sifting of the complicated relationships between these texts, and between these texts and their Platonist readers, is beyond the present investigation and likely to prove inconclusive in the current state of the evidence. Important here is the general consensus that Neopythagoreanism (known in antiquity simply as 'the Pythagoreans' and their thought) was a recognised current of philosophic speculation in antiquity, one especially appreciated by Platonists who preserve for us many of the quotations we still possess of this literature, and that this current was typified by speculations concerning a monadic first principle which was sometimes defined

74 But not all. Anatolius, for example, considers the monad to be noetic (*On the Decad* 22, 19–22; cf. Theo. Sm. *Exp.* 100, 4–6).

75 *Ap.* Simpl. *In Phys.* 230, 34–231, 2 Diels: ὑπὲρ τὸ εἶναι καὶ πᾶσαν οὐσίαν ἀποφαίνεται (230, 37).

76 Dodds 1928, 136–9; Jufresa 1981, 4, with n. 21. These three monads have also led to suspicions that a Neopythagorean writer may have penned the second Platonic Epistle, with its three principles (see Rist 1965a, 80–81, discussing Pl. *Ep.* II, 312d-313a), a claim which, if true, would demonstrate a concrete, formative influence of Neopythagorean transcendental speculation on the 'Platonic' tradition.

77 Περὶ νοῦ καὶ διανοίας, a text tentatively dated as early as the second or third century BCE by Thesleff (1961, 115) and as late as the second CE by Whittaker (1969c, 95 n. 3). The MSS give his name variously as Βροντίνος and Βροτίνος.

78 Syrian. *In Metaph.* 166, 5–6 Kroll: Βροτίνος δὲ ὡς νοῦ παντὸς καὶ οὐσίας δυνάμει καὶ πρεσβείᾳ περέχει. See Merlan 1969, 8.

79 See Whittaker 1969a, 95.

as formally transcendent. There is evidence that some Neopythagorean thinkers dealt to some degree with the problem of ineffability; we are told, for instance, that Pseudo-Lysis, a thinker of the first century CE, defined god as an 'ineffable number'.[80] However, the contributions of Neopythagorean theory to the broader culture of philosophic silence are outshone by the contributions of the Pythagorean mystique, and its attendant tropes of philosophic silence as a form of *logos*, discussed in Chapter 2.

The Transcendent God in the Platonising Religious Currents of the First Centuries CE

Speaking generally, it is a valuable truism that many currents of Græco–Roman religion, from about the first century CE, underwent a broad move toward a more remote, more unknowable, more *transcendent* supreme deity. A rise in the use of alpha-privative adjectives in describing the deity can be seen as a symptom of this trend; there is an increasing concern with negative descriptions and a reluctance to define the god in the limited terms of everyday discourse.[81] God is often said to be beyond naming, to possess many or all names,[82] or given a generic descriptor in place of a name.[83] Again, speaking generally, the theme of the *theos agnostos* appears in many traditions; while Dodds, Festugière and others have argued that this concept, once deemed by some scholars foreign to the 'Greek mind' and doubtless an import from dubious Eastern cults, in fact has its roots in Platonist and Pythagorean tradition,[84] this does not lessen its ubiquity in late antique popular religious thought.[85] This ubiquity points in part to the demotic Middle Platonist character of many religious traditions of the period.

[80] Athenagoras *Legatio* 6 (*PG* VI 901 A): ἀριθμὸν ἄρρητον.

[81] Mortley 1986, II, 13–14.

[82] See e.g. *Ephesians* 1.21; *CH* V 1.1-2; 10.1-2; the Hermetic *Asclepius* 20; Basilides ap. Hippolytus, *Haer*. VII, 20 (*PG* 16, 3302 C) and 21 (*PG* 16 3303 A); Apuleius gives god many names (*Mun*. 37) and elsewhere calls him *innominabilis* (*Pl.* 1.5). See Festugière 1981, IV, 65–70.

[83] See e.g. Mitchell 1999 on the late antique cult of 'the highest god'.

[84] See Dodds in Proclus 1963, App. I, 310–313; Festugière 1981, IV, 1–3.

[85] See e.g. the altar to 'the unknown god' in Athens, *Acts* 17:23. There are of course two senses in which 'unknown' can be understood: simply unknown (through lack of knowledge) or absolutely unknown (through impossibility of knowledge), and the meaning of *agnôstos* will have had indeterminate shadings of both meanings (see n. 34).

The Hermetica

The overall approach to the 'hypercosmic' supreme god in the *Hermetica*[86] has been analysed by Festugière.[87] The Hermetic texts present a *nous* as the ruling and demiurgic principle of the cosmos,[88] one which can be known, although not necessarily expressed in words;[89] paraphrasing Plato, Hermes tells us that 'To know (νοῆσαι) god is difficult, but to speak of him is impossible, even insofar as it is possible to know him.'[90] 'Above' this intellectual principle, however, is a transcendent, ineffable source about which nothing can be said and no definitions can be made.[91] This first principle is often described in negative or privative terms: 'So pray, my son Tat', Hermes instructs his pupil and interlocutor, 'first to the lordly and unique, not one, but that from which comes the One.'[92] It is sometimes described, in terms familiar to students of Late Platonism, as transcending being or essence,[93] or described in cryptic religio-philosophic terms which simultaneously affirm and deny its essence: 'We should dare to say, O Asklepius,' Hermes tells his interlocutor, 'that the essence of God (if, that is, he has an essence), is the good'.[94] Festugière collects a list of juxtaposed passages ascribing attributes to the deity,[95] some of which are highly reminiscent

[86] The degree to which the disparate tractates of the *Corpus Hermeticum* present a coherent worldview has been questioned, but recent consensus favours a substantial coherence of doctrine (see e.g. Festugière 1981, IV, 54–5; Fowden 1986, 95–115, esp. 97–9, who sees the apparent contradictions between texts as signs of a graded, initiatory approach to teaching, corresponding to the Hermetic pupil's ascent from reason toward *gnôsis*; Copenhaver 1992, xxxix). What ancient testimony we have points to the existence of some kind of 'Hermaïc movement' in antiquity, which was presumably responsible for these texts (see Iamb. *de myst.* VIII.4 ff.; the 'books of Hermes' mentioned by Plutarch (*de Is.* 61.375f) and Clement (*Strom.* VI.4) may refer to iterations of this textual tradition). It is worth emphasising that we have every reason to believe that such a movement existed as a literary and intellectual tradition, but no proof that it existed in a ritual or practical sense as groups of 'practising Hermetists'. I will speak in a somewhat loose fashion of Hermetic doctrines, most of which are contradicted somewhere in the corpus, but which still represent a characteristic approach running through the Hermetic texts; the author(s) of the *Hermetica* did not stress terminological precision.

[87] Festugière 1981, IV, 54–78, esp. 70–78. The following summary is indebted to Festugière's discussion.

[88] E.g. *CH* I.9-14.

[89] *CH* I.30-1.

[90] Herm. ap. Stob. II 1 (Exc. I,1,1,): θεὸν νοῆσαι μὲν χαλεπόν, φράσαι δὲ ἀδύνατον, ᾧ καὶ νοῆσαι δυνατόν. Cf., once again, Pl. *Tim.* 28c3-5.

[91] See Festugière 1981, IV, 70–77.

[92] *CH* V.2: σὺ οὖν, ὦ τέκνον Τάτ, εὔξαι πρῶτον τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ μόνῳ καὶ οὐχ ἑνί, ἀλλ᾽ ἀφ᾽ οὗ ὁ εἷς … Cf. II.12, 14.

[93] *CH* II.5; the divine is οὐσιῶδες, but God is ἀνουσίαστον, 'without essence'. See Festugière 1981, 70–1. Cf. e.g. *Enn.* 2.6.1: οὐσιώδης νόησις.

[94] *CH* VI.4; τολμητέον γὰρ εἶπειν, ὦ Ἀσκληπιέ, ὅτι ἡ οὐσία τοῦ θεοῦ, εἴγε οὐσίαν ἔχει, τὸ καλὸν ἐστι ; see NF 77, n. 18. Cf. *CH* XII.1[53]

[95] Festugière 1981, IV, 66–7.

structurally of philosophical apophatic language through their use of unresolved paradox: 'He is the god superior to naming, he is the unmanifest, he is the most manifest.'[96]

With regard to indirect and direct modes of knowing, the *Hermetica* furnish several interesting passages. The Hermetic texts show little interest in the technical philosophical modes of discursive indirect knowing – analogy, synthesis and the like – postulated by the Middle Platonists; we sometimes find in their place what have been called 'occult arts' – astrology, for instance, conceived as a propaedeutic to higher knowledge.[97] They do, however, reflect the common Platonist differentiation between discursive, limited thought and higher faculties, and tend to favour a strong discourse of direct knowledge of the transcendent. Tractate IX.10 discusses the relative merits of *logos* and *nous*:

> To intelligise (νοῆσαι) is to have certainty, and not to have certainty is not to intelligise. Reasoned discourse (*logos*) does not reach the truth, but intellect is great, and, when it has been guided by reason up to a point, it has the means to get [as far as] the truth. After intellect has considered everything carefully and discovered that all of it is in harmony with the interpretations of reason, it has certainty and finds rest in this beautiful conviction.

We note that, like the philosophers, the Hermetic author maintains a certain, limited merit for reasoned thinking (discursive indirect knowing) as a kind of ladder which can be kicked away once it has been used to ascend to *nous*, which is able to attain to the truth denied to discursive thinking. To use intellect is, by definition, to be persuaded.

The Hermetic authors thus privilege *noêsis* as a direct mode of knowing truths about the cosmos; but the evidence indicates that it is conceived as only an indirect mode of knowing the transcendent beyond the cosmos. Another faculty, that of *gnôsis*, conceived as a salvific form of 'direct unknowing', is able to penetrate to the transcendent, 'hypercosmic' deity.[98]

Tractate X.5 describes the quest for the vision, through the purified 'eyes of *nous*', of 'the unperishing, ungraspable beauty of that good [*sc*. beyond *nous*]. You will see it when you have nothing to say about it; for knowledge

[96] *CH* V.10: οὗτος ὁ θεὸς ὀνόματος κρείττων, οὗτος ὁ ἀφανής, οὗτος ὁ φανερώτατος. Tractate V *passim* is a storehouse of creative paradox.
[97] See NF xxxix; Copenhaver 1992, xxxviii.
[98] *Gnôsis* salvific: *CH* I.20.

(γνῶσις) of it is a holy silence and a latency of all sensation.'[99] We note here a shift in vocabulary: the actual attainment of the transcendent beauty is not through *nous* itself, but through 'the eyes of *nous*', vision and *gnôsis.* The passage goes on to equate *gnôsis* with deification (ἀποθεωθῆναι). Here we have a strong description of a mode of direct unknowing of the transcendent: the function of *gnôsis* as supernal and transformative is reinforced through the use of the rhetoric of silence (indeed, the identification of *gnôsis* with silence) and through the abstraction of all possible concepts, both of which deny it any content, and through the shift from words of knowing (*nous*) to words of sensing (θεάσασθαι, juxtaposed to the denial of any sensory experience). *Gnôsis* is the end of the quest for knowledge, but it is something other than knowledge.

The well-known visionary ascent in the *Poimandres* (*CH* I) is another such locus for alternative, and direct, means of (un)knowing the transcendent. Framed as a first-person narrative of a visionary dialogue between an unnamed narrator and a personified *Nous*, this tractate explores several philosophical issues: the nature and pre-eminence of *Nous* (4–6), the origin of the elements of the natural world through the action of the demiurgic *Nous* (8–14), the nature of the return from the world of becoming to the world of true reality (24–26) and the deification of the aspirant. This treatise is of great interest in the present context for its climactic description, in the form of a prayer for *gnôsis*, where the god is addressed as 'unsayable, ineffable [or secret], whom we address through silence'[100] and the fascinating interplay between *logos* and silence which permeates the entire text.

Platonising Gnostic Texts

It is among Gnostic writings that we find discourses of transcendence which most closely resemble the approach followed by Plotinus and later Platonists.[101] More specifically, it is among the so-called Platonising Sethian

[99] καὶ θεάσασθαι τὸ κάλλος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἐκεῖνου τὸ ἄφθαρτον, τὸ ἄληπτον. τότε γὰρ αὐτὸ ὄψει, ὅταν μηδὲν περὶ αὐτοῦ ἔχῃς εἰπεῖν. ἡ γὰρ γνῶσις αὐτοῦ καὶ θεία σιωπή ἐστι καὶ καταργία πασῶν τῶν αἰσθήσεων. Cf. XIII.2: σοφία νοερὰ ἐν σιγῇ.

[100] 32: … ἀνεκλάλητε, ἄρρητε, σιωπῇ φωνούμενε …

[101] The term 'Gnosticism' is problematic, derived as it is from the opponents of these movements whose accounts are often polemical in the highest degree (for a brief overview of modern debate over the term, see Mazur 2010, 20). For this and other reasons Williams proposes 'Biblical demiurgical movements' as an alternative (see Williams 1999a, with discussion at Burns 2004, 64–66). As the proposed 'Biblical' alternative seems not to apply to certain texts, the 'Platonising Sethian treatises' in particular (Turner 2007, 55), this book retains the flawed term 'Gnostic', with the caution that it is taken to refer to a loosely affiliated group of movements which may or may not have defined themselves in terms of 'gnôsis' and which occupy a huge spectrum of religio-philosophical

treatises, certain Valentinian writings and in the surviving fragments of Basilides.[102] These Platonising authors remove the first god decisively from the realm of attributes and being; more importantly, they seem to have grappled with the attendant problems of *speaking* of this god. Platonising Gnostic texts abound in negative and privative descriptions of the first deity, and often embrace paradox and contradictory superlatives in their pursuit of strong expressions of transcendence. The Sethian *Allogenes*, one of the texts which circulated among Plotinus' students at Rome, abounds in statements of the transcendence of the supreme god, known as the 'Triple Power': he is invisible, incomprehensible, ineffable, unnameable, a 'nonsubstantial substance'. 'He lives without Mind, or Life, or Existence, incomprehensibly'.[103] The *Zostrianos*, similarly current in Plotinus' circle, describes a supreme god with an 'origin better than existence', and ponders the way in which being arises from 'an existence which does not exist'.[104] These speculations cannot but remind us of Plotinus' approach to the One beyond being, discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, although a glance at the Gnostic texts *in extenso* shows a radically different thought-world and style.

The Sethian *Apocryphon of John* is a text which survives in three fragmentary versions, two of them from the Nag Hammadi library, which, taken together, deliver a reasonably complete text.[105] It is a good example of the more overtly religious mode in Gnostic texts, and blends the religious esoteric with themes of ineffability and transcendence. The text opens with an evocation of secrecy of a type very common in Gnostic apocrypha:[106] 'The teaching [of the] savior and [the revelation] of the mysteries, the things hidden in silence, [even the things which] he taught John, [his] disciple.'[107] The 'he' in question is Christ; we are in the territory of the early Christ movement, but an esoteric wing thereof, which defines its written teachings as 'secret knowledge'.[108] An apophatic passage occurs in both the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Allogenes* relating to the transcendence of the

possibilities. Recent studies have identified the more 'Platonising' elements in Gnosticism as an identifiable trend within the category as a whole (see Turner 2007, 55–58), and it is with these texts that we will be engaging, as the texts most relevant to philosophic silence in Plotinus.

[102] On the basic taxonomy of the Nag Hammadi library, see Turner 2001, 3–5.

[103] NHC XI; Robinson 1977, 444–5.

[104] NHC VIII, 1; Robinson 1977, 369.

[105] I cite the text and translation of Waldstein and Wisse (1995); on the state of the text, see *ibid*. 1–8.

[106] See Stroumsa 1996a, 39–40.

[107] NHC II, 1 ll. 1–5; p. 13.

[108] We might compare *Allogenes* 52.15–28, where the eponymous protagonist is instructed by the angelic being Youel that the discourse he is about to receive is a 'great mystery' that he must

first deity. Citing the *Allogenes* passage, which is the most complete, we read:

> He is neither divinity, nor blessedness, nor perfection; but he is something unknowable (and) it (i.e. knowability) is not proper to him. Rather, he is something other which is superior to blessedness and divinity and perfection. For he is not something perfect, but another thing which is superior. He is neither unlimited, nor limited by something else, but he is something superior. He is not corporeal; he is not incorporeal. He is not large; he is not small. He is not quantifiable, for he is not a creature. Nor is he something existing that one can know, but he is something else superior which one cannot know.[109]

As Chapter 6 will show, each of these statements is a perfect fit with Plotinus' philosophy, with due allowance for differences in stylistic approach, and many find direct parallels in the *Enneads*. We should also note the combination of themes of the esoteric with themes of the ineffable in this treatise: here, and more generally in Gnostic texts, 'secret' writing seems to have been a stylistic norm; this has led to widespread belief that secret Gnostic societies existed in antiquity, but there is little evidence of this, and more likely the writers in question were exercising literary secrecy.[110]

Other Platonising Gnostic teachings invoke strong negativity, and many *topoi* of silence, in characterising the first god. The Valentinians are reported to have maintained an absolutely transcendent, ineffable first god, known among other names as *Bythos*, 'Abyss'.[111] Irenaeus tells us that they gave their transcendent god a consort called *Sigê*, Silence, although claiming that the first god was itself 'beyond male, beyond female',[112] and 'nothing/no thing whatsoever'.[113] Here we have Silence personified and attending upon a god whose nature is ineffable, that is, can only result in silence. Clement of Alexandria tells us that, 'They say Silence is the mother of all things given forth by the Abyss; in that she could not speak of the Ineffable/Secret [τοῦ Ἀρρήτου, *sc.* the Abyss], she had

guard from the uninitiated, which she then proceeds to narrate. The 'secret knowledge' in question concerns, among other things, the ineffability of the Triple Powered One: mystic silence is enjoined to 'protect' the unrevealable secret.

[109] *Allog.* XI 62, 27–63,13.

[110] Williams 1999b, 34. Cf. Stroumsa 1996a, 55–61, who thinks that secret Gnostic *ecclesiolae* did exist. If this was the case, my argument would then be that their literary secrecy would in that case act as a kind of mystic silence, advertising the existence of the secret groups and emphasising their special status as initiates. If they were secret and wished to hide their existence it would be foolish of them to publish 'secret' mythological works.

[111] Turner 2001, 34.

[112] *Adv. haer.* I .2. 4 (*PG* 7, 457–460): … ὑπὲρ ἄρρεν, καὶ ὑπὲρ θῆλυ εἶναι θέλουσιν.

[113] *Ibid.* I 11. 5 (*PG* 7, 569): μήτε ἄρρενα μήτε θήλιεαν, μήτε ὅλως ὄντα τι.

fallen silent, and in that she apprehended (κατέλαβεν) it, she had called it "Inapprehensible" (ἀκατάληπτον)."[114] The Valentinian Silence speaks in order to hide; her only utterance locates the subject of her speech, the Ineffable Abyss, beyond comprehension.

The Gnostic teacher Basilides (early second-century Alexandria) seems to have posited a strongly transcendent, and remarkably Plotinian, first principle.[115] Hippolytus quotes Basilides on the 'moment' before the cosmos came into being:

> There was a time, he [*sc*. Basilides] says, when nothing was, but the nothing was not any existing thing; rather there was purely and straightforwardly, without any sophism, absolutely not a single thing. When I say 'there was a time' … I am not saying that there [literally] was, but I say that 'there was absolutely not a thing' in order to intimate what it is that I am trying to explain. For that is not absolutely ineffable which is named; that indeed which we call 'ineffable' is not ineffable; and the 'not [even] ineffable' is not named 'ineffable', but is … above any name it could be given.[116]

On the level of theory, what Basilides is describing need not differ on the face of it from the unpredicable first principle described by Alcinoüs; on the level of written practice, however, Basilides is taking this unpredicability far more seriously than his more mainstream counterpart. Not content with denying his readers the luxury of conceiving of a 'god' or 'principle', he denies them the descriptor 'ineffable' as well.

The same passage continues in a strongly negative vein which, by negating negative adjectives, raises the stakes a level beyond the authors discussed so far:

> So when there was nothing – no being, no not-being, no simple, no complex, no unintellective, no unsensory, no human, no angel, no god, nor altogether anything that might be given a name or apprehended through the senses or through intellect … a not-being-god, without intellection, without sense, without willing, without choosing, without undergoing, desired, without desiring, to make the cosmos. I say 'desired' … for the

[114] *Exc. ex Theodoto* 29.

[115] The latter noted by Jufresa 1981.

[116] Hippol. *Haer*. VII.20 (*PG* XVI/3 3302): ἦν, φησὶν, ὅτε ἦν οὐδέν, ἀλλ᾽ οὐδὲ τὸ οὐδὲν ἦν τι τῶν ὄντων, ἀλλὰ ψιλῶς καὶ ἀνυπονοήτως δίχα παντὸς σοφίσματος ἦν ὅλως οὐδὲ ἕν. Ὅταν δὲ λέγω, φησὶν, τὸ ἦν, οὐχ ὅτι ἦν λέγω, ἀλλ᾽ ἵνα σημάνω τοῦτα ὅπερ βούλομαι δεῖξαι, λέγω, φησὶν, ὅτι ἦν ὅλως οὐδέν. Ἔστι γάρ, φησὶν, ἐκεῖνο οὐχ ἁπλῶς ἄρρητον, ὃ ὀνομάζεται· ἄρρητον γοῦν αὐτὸ καλοῦμεν, ἐκεῖνο δὲ οὐδὲ ἄρρητον· καὶ γὰρ τὸ οὐδ᾽ ἄρρητον οὐκ ἄρρητον ὀνομάζεται, ἀλλὰ ἐστί, φησὶν, ὑπεράνω παντὸς ὀνόματος ὀνομαζομένου.

> sake of intimating [what I mean] (σημασίας χάριν), since it was unwilling, unintellective and unsensing . . . [117]

My translation stubbornly attempts to maintain the awkwardness of the original, which not only hypernegates (not satisfied with a god that is not intellective, Basilides' god is 'not-even-not-intellective'), but also contradicts itself in a provocatively paradoxical manner ('desired, without desiring'), with a clear aim toward a very strong written praxis of transcendence. This passage of Basilides furnishes an example of strong transcendence which, stylistically, reminds one more of Proclus or Pseudo-Dionysius than of Plotinus, but in terms of the determination with which it refuses to predicate (and in light of its origin in the Alexandria of Plotinus' time), cannot but put us in mind of the philosopher's apophatic unsaying of the One. Both of these passages use the verb σημαίνω or its cognates to express an incomplete communication of what the author means to express, a usage which is also very important for Plotinus, as discussed on page 225 ff.

Modes of Knowing in Gnostic Texts

The name 'Gnostics' is derived, of course, from *gnôsis*, the salvific, transcendental knowledge which was long supposed to have characterised the thought of these groups. Modern scholarship has largely deconstructed this monolithic model; in fact, the movements gathered under the rubric of Gnosticism show a variety of theories of knowing. Especially relevant to Plotinus, however, are the so-called Sethian movements, both because we know their works circulated and were critiqued in Plotinus' own circle,[118] and because of the similarities between Sethian and Plotinian theories of the highest levels of knowing.

Zostrianos and *Allogenes* present narratives of the ascent of a Gnostic aspirant out of the cosmos and toward the transcendent first god.[119] These narratives are full of lavish mythological detail; the cosmic and hypercosmic realms are not places of impersonal metaphysical realities, but densely populated worlds replete with mediating deities and quasi-deities.[120] These

[117] *Ibid.* VII.21 (*PG* XVI/3 3303): Ἐπεὶ οὖν οὐδὲν ἦν, οὐχ ὕλη, οὐκ οὐσία, οὐκ ἀνούσιον, οὐχ ἁπλοῦν, οὐ σύνθετον, οὐκ ἀνόητον, οὐκ ἀναίσθητον, οὐκ ἄνθρωπος, οὐκ ἄγγελος, οὐ θεὸς, οὐδὲ ὅλως τι τῶν ὀνομαζομένων ἢ δι' αἰσθήσεως λαμβανομένων ἢ νοητῶν πραγμάτων ... οὐκ ὢν Θεὸς ... ἀνοήτως, ἀναισθήτως, ἀβούλως, ἀπροαιρέτως, ἀπαθῶς, ἀνεπιθυμήτος κόσμον ἠθέλησε ποιεῖσαι. τὸ δὲ ἠθέλησε λέγω, φησὶ, σημασίας χάριν, ἀθελήτως καὶ ἀνοήτως καὶ ἀναισθήτως . . . On the negative techniques in this passage see Carabine 1995, 85–91.

[118] Porph. *Plot.* 16.

[119] On Sethian ascent narratives, see Turner 2001, 297.

[120] See Mazur 2010, 176–7.

the soul must negotiate, often by means which combine ritual practices and philosophical conceptual ascent in a way where the two cannot be distinctly separated,[121] a situation doubtless owing partly to the Middle Platonist reading of the religious materials in Plato's own ascent narratives in the *Phædrus*, *Symposium* and *Republic*; to Middle Platonist eyes, these texts already incorporated 'the mysteries' of philosophy.

There is some debate over whether the protagonist of *Zostrianos* attains to the summit of hyperessential reality,[122] but it is clear that Allogenes does so, attaining the 'primary revelation' of the unknowable first god.[123] This revelation is expressed as a state of 'unknowing' which transcends modes of thought and knowledge,[124] and its description is followed by a passage of negative theology (*Allog*. 61.22–67.38), a section of which has been cited on page 169, which hammers this point home.

The Chaldæan Oracles

These philosophical hexameter texts constitute an important source for transcendence in the Middle Platonist milieu.[125] Although nothing in the surviving fragments equals the extremes of unsaying in Basilides or the *Allogenes*/*Apocryphon of John* parallel passage, the uses to which the *Oracles* were put by the Late Platonists who cite them show, at the very least, that they could easily be interpreted as propounding a strong transcendence. The supreme god of the *Oracles*, generally known as 'the Father', but also, like the Valentinian god, called 'Abyss' (fr. 18) has 'snatched himself away' from the power of *nous* to comprehend,[126] and exists outside the All.[127] The *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides*[128] states that the *Oracles* avoid the use of the term τὸ ἕν because to name it thus would betray its ineffability (τὸ ἕν λέγειν αὐτοῦ εἶναι παντελῶς παραιτεῖσθαι), an idea, however, which we need not necessarily read into the *Oracles* themselves.[129]

[121] E.g. *Zostrianos* 22.2-23.20.

[122] See Mazur 2010, 185 with n. 19.

[123] *Allog*. 59.28–32, 60.39.

[124] See Mazur 2010, 188; 220–8.

[125] Lewy 1978 and Majercik 1989 support a second-century origin for the *Oracles*, but, as Potter 1991, 225 points out, we have no direct references to them before Porphyry in the late third. The most persuasive piece of evidence for the earlier dating is Numenius' seeming knowledge of the *Oracles* (Majercik 1989, 144–5), which, however is open to some question (see p. 106).

[126] Fr. 3: ὁ πατὴρ ἥρπασεν ἑαυτόν / οὐδ' ἐν ἑῇ δυνάμει νοερᾷ κλείσας ἴδιον πῦρ.

[127] Fr. 84: αὐτὸς πᾶς ἔξω ὑπάρχει.

[128] For the publishing history of this text, and a short bibliography, see Turner 2007, 68, and n. 32.

[129] IX.7. See Whittaker 1973, 82; cf. Hadot 1968, II, 93 n. 3; Majercik 1989, notes to frr. 9, 10. The mythologising form of the *Oracles* and their fragmentary character makes it difficult to determine what precise doctrine they propounded in this regard: Porphyry would equate the Chaldæan Father with the Plotinian One, but Proclus considered him an exalted noetic principle (Majercik 1989, 6), showing that Platonists with access to the complete text also found no agreed doctrine.

It is at any rate certain that the *Oracles* remove the Father beyond thought and speech.[130]

The *Oracles* are especially important to this discussion for their concept of the 'flower of *nous*', a hyper-intellectual faculty which seems to be a direct mode of unknowing. Fr. 1 describes its function:

> For there exists a certain Intelligible which you must perceive with the flower of the mind. For if you should incline your mind toward it and perceive it as perceiving a specific thing, you would not perceive it.[131]

This faculty, also called the 'flame of *nous*' later in the same passage, has much in common with both the 'eyes of *nous*' of the *Hermetica* and with the 'summit of *nous*' or 'proto-*nous*' theorised by Plotinus, discussed in the following chapter: all of these faculties are noetic yet not noetic, and all must lose the perception of the transcendent reality as an object before they can perceive it.

Philo Judæus

Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–50 CE) deserves some separate treatment; while clearly a philosopher in the Platonist vein (he has been called the 'first Neoplatonist'),[132] Philo's project of Jewish scriptural exegesis has made him difficult to categorise.[133] In light of the preceding remarks on the breadth of the Middle Platonist milieu, this should cause no problems for the present discussion. There have been attempts to link Philo's work with Plotinus' philosophy, as the 'Neoplatonist' elements of Philo's thought, namely his doctrines of God's transcendence of being and ineffability, have understandably reminded scholars of Plotinus' teachings, and a direct line of influence has been posited.[134] There remains a lack of hard evidence that Plotinus knew Philo's work.[135]

Philo posits a transcendent first principle; in his case, a god beyond being.[136] While this god is formally ineffable[137] and unknowable,[138] Philo

[130] Frr. 3, 18, 84 and 191 express ideas of unknowability, with fr. 3, as we have seen, expressing the all-important transcending of *nous*. Fr. 191 describes him as ἀφθέγκτον, 'unutterable'.
[131] Trans. Majercik 1989.
[132] Lewy 1978, 315.
[133] See Dillon 1977, 139–83.
[134] E.g. Wolfson 1952, 115; Gatti 1996, 12.
[135] Dodds in Proclus 1963, 310, with n. 4.
[136] E.g. Ph. *de op. mun.* I.8[51]. See Whittaker 1969b, 79; Mortley, I, 156.
[137] See Casel 1919, 83.
[138] E.g. *de poster. Caini* 13 ff; *de spec. leg.* I 37; see Casel 1919, 77.

does not employ systematic negations such as we have seen in our Middle Platonist authors.[139] He does, however, evoke a strong transcendence through other means. Employing a blend of Græco-Jewish and Platonist methodology, Philo draws deeply on traditional imagery from the mysteries[140] on the one hand, and on Torah exegesis on the other,[141] to surround his ineffable god with rhetorics of silence and secrecy.[142] As we have seen, his Moses delivers the Hebræic law in an esoteric form, the true meanings of which are available only to an elect and hidden from the *aphilosophos*; one becomes a philosopher through a long process, described in initiatory terms, of exegesis and penetration of mysteries.

Philo also presents an indirect mode of unknowing the unknowable god in the form of a visionary ascent narrative (*de op. mun.* 23.70-71) which combines the motifs of the Platonist *via eminentiæ*, mystery terminology and visionary imagery with Biblical exegesis in a fascinating way. Philo is discussing the sense in which man is said by Moses in the Pentateuch to be made 'in the image of God'. Predictably, this is resemblance is not a physical one; it consists in man's *nous*, which stands in relation to man as God does to the universe, as archetypal paradigm and omniscient observer (*ibid.* 69). Philo describes the way in which *nous*, by ascending above the sensory world, knows the true essences of things, but, entering the divine presence, still falls short of unmediated contemplation of the supreme reality:

> And, winged once again, [*nous* is] raised up and, having surveyed the airy region and its vicissitudes, it is borne higher to the æther and the celestial orbits, and joins in the circling dances of the planets and the fixed stars according to the perfect laws of music (κατὰ τοὺς μουσικῆς τελείας νόμους). Following the love of wisdom which leads it, having overtopped the entire sensory reality (πᾶσαν τὴν αἰσθητὴν οὐσίαν ὑπερκύψας), there it longs for the noetic [reality]. And having contemplated in that place the paradigms and ideas of the sensory things it saw here – surpassing beauties – it is possessed by a sober drunkenness and divinely inspired like the mystic celebrants, and is filled with another desire and a better longing. Led by this toward the high summit of the noetic realm, it seems to approach the great King himself. And while it longs to see, pure and unmixed rays of thronging light pour forth like a swollen stream, so that the eye of the discursive mind (τὸ τῆς διανοίας ὄμμα) is dizzied by their radiance.

[139] Cf. Mortley 1986, I, 156.

[140] See Pépin 1984, 28–9; Riedweg 1987, 70–115.

[141] Philo may be the first author to refer to god as ἄρρητος (e.g. *de somn.* 1.67 (see Dillon at Alcinoüs 1993, 101); *de mut. nom.* 14, 15; *quis rer. div. heres* 170 (see Casel 1919, 77)), a term which could quite naturally evoke both the Hellenic mysteries and the Hebrew 'ineffable name' of God which arose in Rabbinic Judæism (see Jufresa 1981, 3; Ph. *de vita Mos.* II 114).

[142] See Casel 1919, 72–86.

Note that we have passed, not only to the noetic realm, but to its highest summit. It is unsurprising that the eye of *dianoia* should be dizzied (σκοτοδινιᾶν, lit. 'afflicted with vertigo') by the divine effulgence, but we note too that the ascended *nous* itself sees only the light, not God Himself. Philo posits a 'summit of *nous*' as a non-discursive form of indirect knowing; for him, the final vision of, or union with, God will remain eternally unattainable, but a light-filled vision is attained to in the proximity of this highest reality through the highest faculty of, or location within, *nous*. Unlike in Basilides, we have here a breathless, narrative account which seems to subsume the dry methodological considerations of unsaying the first reality within the concerns of a visionary itinerary. But Philo and Basilides both emerge through their texts as predecessors of Plotinus in expressions of strong transcendence, whether or not they represent actual sources for Plotinus' writings. In Plotinus we will see both the dry, insistent unsaying of apophatic philosophy and the visionary ascent narrative as means toward expressing the unexpressible nature of the First.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this chapter has been to give some background to Plotinian transcendence. No attempt at a source-critical approach has been made beyond tracing the general move toward a transcendent first principle in Middle Platonism which supplied an intellectual foundation from which Plotinus' approach to transcendence took flight. More detailed questions of sources are fraught with difficulty in this connection; we might reasonably ask why the approaches to transcendence in contemporary Gnostic writings, which Plotinus certainly knew well enough to refute at length in Treatise 33, or in the *Hermetica* which arose in the same Græco-Egyptian milieu as Plotinus, have so much in common with Plotinus' writings where the surviving works of Middle Platonist philosophy do not.[143] We will return to this question in concluding, and offer some tentative contributions to the ongoing debate on Plotinus' sources.

[143] Cf. Armstrong 1990a, 100: 'It is difficult to be sure when and where this conviction of the negative transcendence of the supreme divinity first appeared. It is found in these first centuries of our era among Gnostics as well as among Hellenic philosophers … [who were] Platonized Pythagoreans or Pythagoreanizing Platonists.'

CHAPTER 6

The Transcendent Absolute and the Ineffability of Reality in Plotinus

Determinatio negatio est.

Baruch Spinoza, Ep. 52.

Plotinus' world-view is, in a sense, very simple; at the same time, it is very difficult to understand and explain. Plotinus is intensely aware of this difficulty, and his work is a series of attempts at clarifying the ramifications of this world-view. The *Enneads* reflect to some extent the day-to-day disputations of Plotinus' philosophic seminar,[1] and the reader can often detect the puzzled questions of his students informing the varied approaches Plotinus musters to clarify difficult points, and in his patient, indefatigable attempts to explain these matters one sees the Socratic midwife gently encouraging the truth, bit by bit, into the light of day.

Scholarship, particularly over the course of the last fifty years, has gone a long way toward explaining how Plotinus thinks the world is, and why it is that way. There is a problem prior to the questions of metaphysics, however, which the disciplines of analytic philosophy and the history of ideas have largely failed to address. This is the problem of ineffability and its implications for written philosophy.

Plotinus simply does not believe that reality is fully susceptible to an explanatory account. He has cogent and well thought-out reasons for this belief; the history of philosophy has long since disposed of the anachronistic figure of Plotinus the anti-rationalist, who took refuge in the vague territory of 'mysticism', and has brought forth in its stead the more accurate model of a philosopher whose reason led him to place certain aspects of reality outside the scope of thought and language.[2] Analytical philosophy has done an excellent job of delineating the levels of reality in Plotinus' metaphysics, and a decent job of showing at what points Plotinus believes

[1] Or so Porphyry seems to indicate at *Plot.* 5 60–1: the subjects of Plotinus' writings arose from problems which happened to arise in the course of school discussions.

[2] See Introduction, n. 8 above. Cf. comments at Emilsson 2007, 6.

discourse and thought fall short of reality; we have, as it were, a good map of Plotinus' world-view, with the borders roughly marked out. The present chapter explores these borders, noting the limits Plotinus places on discourse and on different types of cognition. While recognising these limits, we should also be alive to the power of rhetoric in philosophy; the following chapter will thus proceed to tear down this elegant systematic structure, when we address Plotinus' writing of the unwritable, in which he repeatedly assails, and passes beyond, these self-erected borders.

The Architecture of the Ineffable in Plotinus

It has become almost a tradition in Plotinian studies to describe Plotinus' universe by surveying, in turn, the three primary hypostases or realities: the One, *nous* and Soul.[3] This approach has the merit of beginning with the most unified and primary reality and moving down the chain of being to the world of greatest division, difference and multiplicity, thus following Plotinus' own judgement of the relative importance and reality of each hypostasis in descending order. It has the drawback of inevitably tending to present Plotinian reality as a sort of ontological wedding cake. It should be kept in mind that all the 'levels' of Plotinus' reality, which may even appear as separate 'worlds' when viewed from the fragmentary vantage point of the embodied soul, comprise, when viewed *sub specie æternitatis*, a single, unified whole, whose primary nature is an absolute, undifferentiated, infinite unity, and whose multiple dynamic interactions are best understood as the 'internal acts' of that reality.[4]

It has often been remarked that, in order to consider any one aspect of Plotinus' world-view, it is necessary to consider his world-view as a whole.[5] Considerations of space mean that no serious survey of Plotinian metaphysics can be undertaken here, but fortunately a large body of excellent studies of the subject exist, to which this chapter makes liberal reference.[6] A restricted inquiry is proposed here, aimed at elucidating the problems

[3] While the term 'hypostasis' is often taken to mean 'level of reality', its basic meaning is simply 'something truly real'. The three primary hypostases are thus not the only hypostases in Plotinus' universe, and the One can only be said to be a hypostasis in a manner of speaking (see Appendix C, p. 261). The hypostasis Soul is capitalised to differentiate it from the souls of individual human beings.

[4] See p. 192.

[5] E.g. Deck 1967, 3.

[6] Good systematic accounts of Plotinus' universe include Armstrong 1967; Bréhier 1958; Rist 1967a. On the relationship between the One and *nous* Bussanich 1988 is essential; see also Emilsson 2007. On the nature of soul, Blumenthal 1971 is the standard work; Merlan 1969 is also important.

of discourse specific to each hypostasis. This section will attempt to clarify in a basic, schematic way, the degree to which each hypostasis is said by Plotinus to be thinkable and describable, and, if there are ways in which the hypostasis is not thinkable or describable, the reasons for this.

After this analysis of the levels of reality, the following section will 'reintegrate' them, discussing some of the implications of Plotinus' 'structured monist' world-view for the ineffability of his picture of reality as a whole. The artificial separation of intellect from the One, and Soul from intellect, is a discursive necessity which Plotinus struggled with, but which he found necessary for philosophic discourse to proceed. The present discussion faces the same limitations and difficulties, but will attempt to mitigate these by emphasising the importance of the unitary nature of Plotinus' world.

The One or the Good

Attempting a summary characterisation of the Plotinian One presents serious problems. This is particularly true in a book dealing with the ways in which Plotinus denies the possibility of describing the One; the One is the conceptual *locus* for Plotinus' apophatic strategies and verbal denials of the efficacy of language. Let it be understood at the outset that every statement which follows is to be taken as a kind of provisional metaphor for the One's nature; as Plotinus says at the beginning of one of his most extensive descriptive passages concerning the One, what follows will, in fact, be incorrect (οὐκ ὀρθῶς), since accurate discourse concerning the One is impossible.[7]

Plotinus is clear that nothing can be predicated of the One, not even the name 'one', and that every statement made about it must in some way be qualified.[8] He tells us, in language inspired by the seventh Platonic epistle, that it is ineffable.[9] At the same time, he tells his readers a great deal about the One; I argue in the following chapter that an overarching principle of Plotinian reading is that any kataphatic assertion about the One will be in some way negated or modified, resulting in irreducible indeterminacy of the object of discourse. Keeping these apophatic considerations in mind, we can turn to what Plotinus does tell us about the One.

[7] VI.8[39]12.37–13.1–5; cf. 47–50; 18.52–3; 21.20. I accept Igal's addition of οὐκ in the second passage, as this harmonises it with the later passages.

[8] See p. 181.

[9] VI.9[9]4.11-12: οὐδὲ ῥητὸν οὐδὲ γραπτόν, citing Pl. *Ep. VII*. 341c5; V.3[49]13.1: ἄρρητον.

The One or Good, for Plotinus, is the ultimate reality; as Armstrong points out, this may be the only statement which can be made about it which does not require serious qualification.[10] It is the source of everything; ontologically, it gives rise to intellect and from intellect Soul arises, which in turn creates time, space and bodies.[11] This series must, however, always be understood as one of ontological priority, and never as a sequential process in time.[12] The One, although its primary nature is one of 'repose', 'silence' and absolute inactivity,[13] is nevertheless the latent source of all existence. While the One is the first hypostasis, in the sense of the first 'reality', Plotinus often qualifies it as 'like a hypostasis' or, 'hypostasis, as it were'.[14]

The One as the Good

The One is identified with the Good 'beyond being' of Plato's *Republic*,[15] an identification Plato himself is said to have made in his oral teaching.[16] This good must be understood in one sense as the absolute Good, since it is not a good depending on a comparative bad for its meaning.[17] However, the Good is not 'good to itself'; like many of the quasi-attributes which Plotinus applies to the One, the characterisation of the One as 'good' is understood as 'the good of other things';[18] that is, the good in lower hypostases derives from the One, but it itself transcends the attribute 'good'.

Plotinus uses striking images to express the superabundant goodness of the One: its nature 'overflows' into manifestation; it is 'as it were boiling

[10] Armstrong 1967, 1. Cf. V.3[49]13.1–6, cited p. 225.

[11] The One is efficient cause of all composite beings: VI.4[22]10; VI.7[38]23.22–4; V.3[49]15.12–28, 17.10–4. See Deck 1967, 93–109.

[12] V.1[10]6.19–22; V.8[31]7; VI.6[34]6.4–5; VI.7[38]35.29; II.4[46]5.24–8. Plotinus found the idea that the universe had a beginning in time absurd (II.1[53]4.25–6; cf. III.2[19]1.20–21), and emphasises that, far from having created reality and then gone on to other tasks, the One is perpetually sustaining existing things, at least as understood from a temporal perspective (VI.7[38]23.22–4). From the One's 'perspective' there can be no perpetuity, as there is no time.

[13] V.1[10]4.38–9, 6.12–13.

[14] E.g. VI.8[39]7.46-7: οἷον ὑπόστασις. See Appendix C, p. 262.

[15] Pl. *R.* 509b8-9 (cited more than 30 times in the *Enneads*; see *index fontium* H + S2). Plotinus does not see the One as the *Form* of the good discussed by Plato in the dialogue, but rather as beyond the Forms (see e.g. II.9[33]1.5-6); his relegation of the Forms to the level of *nous*, discussed below, would make such an identification impossible. Indeed, the Plotinian One is ἀνείδεος, 'formless' (VI.9[9]3.44; V.5[32]6.4-5; VI.7[38]33.13, 21, 37).

[16] See p. 70. The equation of the Good with the One is not explicit in Plato's dialogues, although it can be argued that it is implicit (as Gaiser 1980, 12 n. 26, who argues that Plato arrives at this equation through mathematical considerations).

[17] VI.9[9]6.55-7. See Hoffmann 1997, 348.

[18] VI.9[9]6.39-42; VI.7[38]41.27-31; cf. III.8[51]2.2-8, 11.10-19; I.7[54]1.13-23. See Heiser 1991, 61.

over with life'.[19] Plotinus also extensively employs apophatic language in attempting to delineate the One's productive relationship to the realm of being: 'Everything both is the One and is not the One. Everything is the One, in that it comes from the One; but it is not the One, in that the One granted [its existence] whilst abiding in himself.'[20] The discursive consequences of this simultaneous immanence and transcendence are discussed further below.

The Simplicity of the One

The One is also a transcendent monad; it is not a unity, but rather 'unity as such' (αὐτόεν).[21] Plotinus uses the Platonic categories of Sameness and Otherness in this regard: the One contains nothing of Otherness, and thus there can be no 'parts' which might make it multiple, nor any second terms to which it might be compared.[22] It is radically simple; so much so that it cannot be comprehended by human discourse or language, since ultimate simplicity is incomprehensible to any knower which has the slightest multiplicity in it, even *nous*,[23] an evolution of the axiom that 'like is only known by like' which we have seen in certain Middle Platonic sources. Plotinus also considers this problem from the opposite direction: since every act of knowing or cognition must involve, minimally, the duality of a knower and a known, the One can itself possess no knowledge, even of itself.[24]

This is a major reason, for Plotinus, why the One cannot be comprehended by thought or language: for, 'what discursive description (διέξοδος) can there be of the absolutely simple?'[25] Indeed, its simplicity takes its unity beyond unity: having no possible second term, it cannot even be called 'one'.[26] Far from being an exalted form of numerical unity,

[19] VI.5[23]12.10: οἷον ὑπερζέουσαν ζωῇ; V.2[11]1.8-9: οἷον ὑπερερρύη καὶ τὸ ὑπερπλῆρες αὐτοῦ πεποίηκεν ἄλλο. Gersh 1978, 17–20 discusses key terms in Platonist emanatory terminology, including Plotinus' ζεῖν and ὑπερζεῖν, 'boiling' and 'boiling over'.

[20] V.2[11]2.24-26: Πάντα δὲ ταῦτα ἐκεῖνος καὶ οὐκ ἐκεῖνος· ἐκεῖνος μέν, ὅτι ἐξ ἐκείνου· οὐκ ἐκεῖνος δέ, ὅτι ἐκεῖνος ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ μένων ἔδωκεν. Cf. *ibid.* 1.1: Τὸ ἓν πάντα καὶ οὐδὲ ἕν.

[21] V.3[49]12.51. For the probable influence of Neopythagorean speculation in this context, see especially Whittaker 1973.

[22] Although the One is other than all things (V.4[7]1.6; V.3[49]11.18; cf. III.8[51]8.9), the principle of Otherness is not present in the One (VI.9[9]8.32 ff; see Rist 1971; Schroeder 1987, 680). Sameness and Otherness are among the five 'greatest kinds' considered at Pl. *Sph.* 254d ff., and feature as a pair in the *Timæus* 35 ff. On their use in Plotinus see Schroeder 1978, 63–7.

[23] E.g. V.8[31]5.19-24; V.5[32]1.38 ff. Cf. Trouillard 1961, 431–2.

[24] VI.7[38]37–41, 39.19-20; V.3[49]1.3-4, 11 and 12; III.8[51]11.12-14.

[25] V.3[49]17.21-25; cf. VI.8[39]8. See Hoffmann 1997, 343.

[26] V.5[32]6.26-30; II.9[33]1.1-8. Cf. V.4[7]1.9-11: It is false to call 'one' that about which there is no account or knowledge, and which is said to be beyond being.

it is called the negation of all number;[27] 'the One' must be regarded as a negative description, which can only tell us what the One is not, rather than revealing the truth of what it 'is'.[28]

Plotinus applies this thinking of radical simplicity very specifically to the realm of language: a perfectly simple reality must be unpredicable, since any predication involves at least subject, copula and predicate, even if one or more of these is only implied. To say even that 'the One is', involves two concepts – 'one' and 'is' – which would imply, for Plotinus, that the One's 'is-ness', its being, is a separate characteristic from its essential nature.[29] By 'radical simplicity' we cannot mean 'true oneness'; in fact, it is more accurate to say that the One is 'radically undetermined', which is another reason, for Plotinus, why no statements may be made about it.[30] This 'law of unpredicability' is understood by Plotinus to be an absolute law when 'speaking properly'.[31] He does not always 'speak properly' about the One, however, and to do so would be not to speak at all. The strategies by which Plotinus 'manages' this discursive law are discussed in the following chapter.

The One Beyond Being

The negative fact that the One is situated beyond *ousia*, whether we translate this term as 'substance', 'essence', 'entity' or 'being', is also crucial for the way in which its unpredicability is conceived in the *Enneads*. *Ousia* is a key term in the Platonist tradition, and a thorough discussion of its parameters is beyond the scope of this book; however, its significance for Plotinian ideas of inexpressibility should be noted here.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the idea that the first principle is 'beyond being' was generally accepted in Middle Platonist discussions of the first principle, and these authors show various signs of an appreciation of the ineffability of a truly transcendent reality, although the surviving literature leaves us only with passages expressing a fairly weak transcendence. In Plotinus we see a major development of the philosophy of transcendence: for Plotinus, 'beyond being' means very definitely both 'beyond thought' and 'beyond discourse'. The philosophic reasons for this

[27] VI.2[19]10.14; V.5[32]4 *passim*. Cf. III.8[51]9; *nous* is number, but the One is that which is beyond number, and its source.

[28] V.5[32]6.29-31. Cf. Bréhier 1958, 157; Heiser 1991, 61.

[29] V.3[49]10.35-40. See Mortley 1975, 367–8, 373; Schroeder 1996, 343–4. On unpredicability in Plotinus see Schroeder 1985, 75–6; Hoffmann 1997, 343.

[30] VI.9[9]3-4. See Schroeder 1996, 344.

[31] VI.9[9]3.51, 5.29-34; V.5[32]6.26-30; II.9[33]1.1-8; VI.7[38]38.4-9. Cf. III.7[45]2.6-7.

are complex, but the main thrust of Plotinus' thinking on the subject is that, *ousia* being the primary characteristic of the Forms and of the *noêsis* through which the Forms are instantiated (see below), a reality beyond being would logically be beyond the ability of *nous* to comprehend. Being, for Platonists, is always intelligible, and anything intelligible must have being. If either of these qualities is removed, the other follows.

The One as the Beautiful

Lastly, Plotinus' characterisations of the One as the Platonic Good and as the Neopythagorean Monad, both of which lead to situations of radical unsayability, are sometimes put into a state of tension with his characterisation of the One as the Beautiful of Plato's *Symposium*. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 5, the 'mysteries of Diotima' in that dialogue provided the Platonist model for the *via eminentiæ*, the intellectual ascent up the chain of being to first principles. The motive force for this ascent in Plato's account is the *erôs* inspired in the lover of beauty, ultimately by the first principle of all beauties, the Beautiful itself.

Plotinus' account of *erôs* as a factor in practical philosophy brings into his philosophy of transcendence a contrasting dynamic of drawing near to the One,[32] and even of attaining to an erotic union with the One.[33] *Erôs*, in fact, functions in some Plotinian texts as a kind of presence of the One at all levels of reality, and thus acts as the positive side of the presence/absence dichotomy. The One is the worthy object of *erôs*, but also *is erôs* and directs *erôs* toward itself.[34] *Erôs* for the One is infinite, because the principle itself is infinite.[35]

There are two concepts involved here: Beauty itself (τὸ κάλλος or ἡ καλλονή) and 'the beautiful' (τὸ κάλον).[36] If the One is Beauty, we should not therefore expect it to be beautiful, just as its goodness is not a goodness with regard to itself, but toward beings. It is thus a beauty-beyond-beauty.[37] But Plotinus sometimes, albeit rarely, describes the One as beautiful, and the relationship of the individual soul to it as an erotic relationship fired by erotic attraction to this beauty.[38] Scholars have normally denied the

[32] V.9[5]2; I.3[20]1-2. On *erôs* in Plotinus, see generally Rist 1964b, 56–112; Rist 1967a, 53–65; Lacrosse 1994.
[33] See Mazur 2009.
[34] VI.8[39]15.1 ff.
[35] VI.7[38]32.26-8.
[36] On the rich Plotinian vocabulary relating to beauty, see Stern-Gillet 2000, 38–9.
[37] VI.7[38]32.29: κάλλος ὑπὲρ κάλλος; 32.31: κάλλου ἄνθος.
[38] V.5[32]8.10, 12.7-19; VI.2[43]18.1. See Stern-Gillet 2000, 39 n. 6.

possibility of the One's being beautiful on the basis of Plotinus' regular practice of negating any such attributes,[39] but this leaves the problem of his descriptions of the One's beauty. The problem is acute, because this beauty is not presented simply as an attribute, but as a phenomenological fact which leads to the ascent of the soul through *erôs*; in other words, Plotinus gives it a practical role in the philosophic ascent, which cannot be reduced by a reading of the attribute in question as a qualified or metaphorical usage.[40] This is crucial for Plotinian discourse because, as the following chapter will argue, it results in a paradoxical ability on the philosopher's part to say, in some measure, not the One itself, but the philosopher's state of being toward the One, and even his union therewith.

Nous or Intellect

Nous or intellect is the primary being (οὐσία), in distinction to the primary reality, since the One cannot be said to *be* anything, but may for the purposes of exposition be said to be 'real'. In fact, being is the essence of *nous*, and the being of everything else that is, is derived from its primary being.[41] Plotinus repeatedly quotes with approval the cryptic statement of Parmenides, τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι, to indicate that the act of *noêsis is* the act of being;[42] we begin to see one reason why transcending *ousia* would mean transcending *nous*.

Plotinus' *nous* is a divine intellect. Plotinus often describes *nous* as a god, or simply as God,[43] an appellation used for the One or Good, by contrast, in only a few instances.[44] Plotinus' concept of *nous* famously combines the Platonic idea of a world of Forms with Aristotle's conception of the supreme god as self-contemplating intellect.[45] The result is an intellect whose 'thoughts', νοήματα or νοητά, are the Forms, and Plotinus argues at length for the location of the Forms within *nous*, despite the considerable

[39] E.g. Rist 1967a, 59.

[40] I.6[1]7. Stern-Gillet 2000 emphasises this side of Plotinus' thought.

[41] V.1[10]4.26 ff; V.2[11]1.11-13; I.3[20]2.13. *Nous* is being, intellect and life: III.6[1]6.10 ff; V.1[10]4; V.6[24]6.22-3. At V.3[49]13.2-3 Plotinus alters the Platonic ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας (Pl. *R.* VI 509b9-10) to ἐπέκεινα τοῦ νοῦ, illustrating the equivalence of the two concepts.

[42] Parm. Fr. B3 DK, cited at V.9[5]5.29-30; V.1[10]8.17-18; V.6[24]6.22-3; III.5[36]7.51; VI.7[38]41.18; I.4[46]10.6; III.8[51]8.8. See Mortley 1986, I, 63–9. Cf. Sikkema 2009, 149.

[43] See Sleeman and Pollet 1980 *s.v.* θεός (b). At II.3[52]18.15 *nous* is equated with the Platonic demiurge.

[44] See *ibid.* (c). Elsewhere, however, Plotinus states that the One is 'greater than *nous* or god' (VI.9[9]6.12-13). See Rist 1962.

[45] See Szlezák 1979, esp. 126–32. *Metaph.* 1072b is the most important Aristotelean passage in this connection.

difficulties this raises for epistemology and ontology.[46] *Nous* is the divine mind, whose 'thoughts' are realities.

With *nous* we can be said, with some reservations, to be safely out of the realm of the formally ineffable: truth-bearing statements about *nous* are possible, and indeed the truth-value of statements is dependent on *nous*, since *noêsis* has for its objects the Forms, which are the self-verifying, unchanging objects of true knowledge.[47] But *nous* is by no means easily understood or expressed, and, as I will argue below in the context of *noêsis*, while not formally ineffable in the sense that the One is, *nous* is nevertheless treated by Plotinus as a principle which cannot be fully expressed through language. The reasons for this rest mainly on two paradoxes.

The first of these is that, unlike the One, *nous* cannot be said to be ultimately simple, and is comprised in some sense of 'parts'; however, it is still an indivisible unity.[48] This paradox of unity in multiplicity extends down through the ontological chain to soul and even to individual material bodies, but it is especially sharp at the level of *nous*, as *nous* is the reality which achieves the difficult task of bridging the gap between non-being and being. The second paradox is that *nous*, like the One, is simultaneously transcendent and immanent. While undetermined by space, *nous* can be said to be 'everywhere' in a way that the spatial cosmos cannot; its transcendence is equal to an emphatic universal presence.[49] Similarly, it is both present to and absent from the soul.[50] Both of these problems are discussed in the following section. In the meantime, two further characteristics of Plotinus' *nous* should be discussed here. These involve the relationship of *nous* to the individual human being.

[46] See in particular V.5[32].

[47] See p. 202.

[48] The unity in multiplicity of intellect is approached from many different angles by Plotinus. E.g. V.3.15.12: it is the One-many (ἕν πολλά) of Pl. *Prm.* 144e5. VI.7[38]33.11: the Forms taken together are τὸ πάγκαλον καὶ ποικίλον καὶ οὐ ποικίλον. Cf. IV.8[31]3.10 ff. Cf. V.3[49]1, where intellect's necessary unity is stated, vs. *ibid.* 10, where Plotinus argues that intellect cannot be completely without parts. Cf. VI.9[9]5.16. At V.7[18]1.25-6 *nous* is infinite (τὴν δὲ ἐν τῷ νοητῷ ἀπειρίαν) and partless (ἐν ἀμερεῖ), but 'comes forward' [i.e. exists] when it acts. Beierwaltes 2008 explicates the theory of unity and multiplicity of *nous* in Proclus, a discussion which is also very useful for understanding Plotinus' theory.

[49] V.9[5]13.13-14: Ὁ μὲν γὰρ αἰσθητὸς κόσμος μοναχοῦ, ὁ δὲ νοητὸς πανταχοῦ; V.2[11]2.20-1; VI.4[22]2; V.5[32]9 *passim*; III.9[33]4.4-6; VI.8[39]16.1-2. See O'Meara 1980; Gerson 1994, 18; Wilberding 2005, 317.

[50] V.3[49]3.26-7: *nous* is 'ours yet not ours' (ἡμέτερον καὶ οὐχ ἡμέτερον). Cf. VI.4[22]2.47-9: *nous* is totally present to those 'for which it is neither distant nor near, but who are able to receive it' (Καὶ ὅλως ἐστὶν ἐκείνων ἑκάστῳ, οἷς μήτε πόρρωθέν ἐστι μήτε ἐγγύθεν, δυνατοῖς δὲ δέξασθαί ἐστιν).

Intellect as Intelligible World

The Plotinian *nous* is outside time and space and it contains no qualities (ποιότεις).[51] But it nevertheless has contents which have relative position and interact with each other: not only Forms, but intelligible gods and human beings inhabit the noetic world. In fact, everything that is present in the world of bodies is present in *nous*: the sun and revolving heavens,[52] 'earth and sea and plants and animals and men',[53] and everything that is made through *logos* and according to Form.[54] *Nous* is an intelligible cosmos, of which the world of sense is an attenuated image.[55] Individual human beings are there, somehow not only dwelling outside time and space, but perceiving through noetic senses,[56] communicating through some kind of noetic form of communication, and even walking about.[57] People there possess noetic bodies, the precise nature of which Plotinus leaves an open question,[58] composed of a noetic matter of which the matter of this world is a reflection.[59]

This conception of intellect brings us to a paradoxical affirmation of action and movement without time or space. While this is difficult to comprehend, it is undoubtedly what Plotinus wishes to convey. I must agree,

[51] II.6[17]3.10-20: qualities arise through thinking, when *logismos* grasps the Forms and produces imitations of them. VI.2[19]14; VI.1[42]12.42 ff.

[52] II.9[33]4.29-32.

[53] V.8[31]3.32-6. Cf. II.9[33]4.26-32, where noetic fire, the noetic earth and the noetic sun are mentioned.

[54] VI.7[38]11.3-4 and ff: fire, water and plants are mentioned.

[55] VI.4[22]2.32-49.

[56] VI.7[38]6 and 7.

[57] In V.8[31]4 Plotinus describes the life ἐκεῖ, 'in that place', as one of pure realities, which are transparent mutually to one another, interconnected (5–8: ἀλλὰ πᾶς παντὶ φανερὸς εἰς τὸ εἴσω καὶ πάντα· φῶς γὰρ φωτί. Καὶ γὰρ ἔχει πᾶς πάντα ἐν αὑτῷ, καὶ αὖ ὁρᾷ ἐν ἄλλῳ πάντα, ὥστε πανταχοῦ πάντα καὶ πᾶν πᾶν καὶ ἕκαστον πᾶν καὶ ἄπειρος ἡ αἴγλη), and in 'pure movement' (11–12: Ἔστι δὲ καὶ κίνησις καθαρά), where 'each one walks' (15: Βέβηκε δὲ ἕκαστος).

[58] VI.2[19]21.52-53 clearly affirms that there are noetic bodies. At VI.7[38]6.7-9 he seems to equivocate, and *ibid.* 7.25 may also be equivocal, depending on a disputed reading (ἀσώματα H + S 2, σώματα H + S 1, Ficino, Armstrong). In IV.3[27IV.3[49]18.13-15 Plotinus speaks of the bodies men have there ἐν οὐρανῷ (on *nous* as 'heaven', see below). These bodies are 'pure, and like an eye, and nothing is hidden or feigned, but another (person there) has already seen before one has spoken' (IV.3[27] 18.20-2). IV.4[28]5.13-20 makes it clear that there are noetic bodies, but that Plotinus has an open mind as to what form they take: '[Human beings] will recognise each other there, especially if they must necessarily be clothed in bodies of similar form [to their earthly ones]'. Perhaps the bodies will be spherical; we will still recognise the individual characteristics (ἤθη) of the people we knew on earth, which will survive the transition to the noetic realm.

[59] V.1[10]3.23: καλὴ δὲ καὶ ἡ νοῦ ὕλη νοοειδὴς οὖσα καὶ ἁπλῆ. This 'beautiful and pure' noetic matter is discussed at length in II.4, 'On Matter', esp. 3–5 and 15, where it is contrasted with the lower matter which is its image. Cf. III.8[51]11.2-3. See Rist 1961, 125.

too, with the view put forward by Wilberding (2005) that *nous* should also be seen as occupying a *location* with regard to the world of the senses, that is to say outside the sphere of the fixed stars, while still being understood as occupying no *space*.[60] Plotinus' references to the noetic world as οὐρανός may thus be taken as a literal description, at least when viewed from the perspective of the embodied soul, doubtless arising at least in part from a literal reading of Plato's *Phædrus* 247c-e.[61]

As an intelligible world, *nous* can be visited by the philosopher. Plotinus describes journeying to and through this supernal realm:

> Often, awakening to my self from the body and becoming separate from all other externals, going within myself, I have seen an extraordinarily marvellous beauty. Convinced then that this was far the better portion, I actually lived the best life, and was assimilated to the divine (ζωήν τε ἀρίστην ἐνεργήσας καὶ τῷ θείῳ εἰς ταὐτὸν γεγενημένος). Establishing myself in that, I came to that noetic reality above all others and established myself there. After this establishment in the divine, having descended from intellect to discursive reasoning, I am baffled by how I have now come down, and how my soul has ever come to be within the body, when it has shown itself to be of such [a nature] by itself, even when in the body.[62]

We will return to this description in the discussion of modes of cognition in the next section. For now, however, two important points to which the discussion will return should be emphasised. The first is the characteristic Plotinian dichotomy between ἐνταῦθα, 'here' (that is, in the realm of matter and of the senses) and ἐκεῖ, 'there' (that is, in *nous* and its timeless realm of being and unified perception), which runs through the *Enneads* as a leitmotif. Secondly, we should note that there are at least two phases to Plotinus' sojourn in *nous*; first, assimilation to the divine intellect, and then a further movement to the highest noetic reality.

[60] Wilberding's arguments are based especially on IV.3[27]17.3-4. They represent a minority view, as against the common interpretation which sees Plotinus' spatialised descriptions of *nous* as metaphorical.

[61] E.g. IV.3[27]18.13-15. Cf. Armstrong 2003, Vol. 4, 88 n. 1.

[62] IV.8[31]1.1-11: Πολλάκις ἐγειρόμενος εἰς ἐμαυτὸν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος καὶ γινόμενος τῶν μὲν ἄλλων ἔξω, ἐμαυτοῦ δὲ εἴσω, θαυμαστὸν ἡλίκον ὁρῶν κάλλος, καὶ τῆς κρείττονος μοίρας πιστεύσας τότε μάλιστα εἶναι, ζωήν τε ἀρίστην ἐνεργήσας καὶ τῷ θείῳ εἰς ταὐτὸν γεγενημένος καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ ἱδρυθεὶς εἰς ἐνέργειαν ἐλθὼν ἐκείνην ὑπὲρ πᾶν τὸ ἄλλο νοητὸν ἐμαυτὸν ἱδρύσας, μετὰ ταύτην τὴν ἐν τῷ θείῳ στάσιν εἰς λογισμὸν ἐκ νοῦ καταβὰς ἀπορῶ, πῶς ποτε καὶ νῦν καταβαίνω, καὶ ὅπως ποτέ μοι ἔνδον ἡ ψυχὴ γεγένηται τοῦ σώματος τοῦτο οὖσα, οἷον ἐφάνη καθ' ἑαυτήν, καίπερ οὖσα ἐν σώματι. Cf. V.3[49]6.13–18.

Intellect as Faculty

It remains briefly to introduce the role of *nous* as a faculty of intellection, discussed more fully in the following section. As well as being a supreme, transcendent divine intellect, and a universe containing all reality, νοῦς of course has the function of νοεῖν. But what might seem the most basic function of intellect, intellection, in fact presents the most perplexing difficulties for interpreters of Plotinus, especially when considered in parallel with *nous*' role as intelligible world and intelligible deity.

This book either leaves *noêsis* untranslated, or uses the awkward 'intellection', for the reason that, as will emerge below, modern English lacks a word that even approximates its meaning. *Noêsis* is certainly not 'thinking',[63] and, while it is, in a sense, a kind of 'knowing', the latter term applies better, in the nominative sense of 'knowledge', to *epistêmê* or *ennoia*, or in the verbal sense of 'knowing', to *gnôsis*.

Noêsis is, for Plotinus, a form of cognition wherein the knower, that which is known and the act of knowing are one.[64] That which intelligises (νοῦς or ὁ νοῶν) becomes, in the act of intellection (νόησις), that which is intelligised (τὸ νόημα, τὸ νοητόν, that is to say, εἶδος/εἴδη, one or more Forms). *Noêsis* is an act, but does not take place in time; it is purely instantaneous or timeless.[65]

The importance of this definition for this book is the way Plotinus' concept of *noêsis* removes it radically from what might be called everyday, or 'normal', modes of cognition, raising it to a status above discursivity and therefore language. Since *noêsis* has the Forms as its objects (its 'thoughts', as it were), it deals, by definition, only in truth. However, with the introduction of some mediation between the thinker and the Forms (as is the case with the temporally fragmented thoughts of the soul at the level of *dianoia*), mistakes become possible. Plotinus thus removes absolute truth-claims from the realm of language, insofar as the soul, at the level of discursive thought, will have only a mediated access to the Forms – 'it will intelligise secondarily'.[66]

It follows, too, from the above, that the soul, if it is to engage in *noêsis*, must somehow become *nous*, at least in the moment of *noêsis*, since

[63] See p. 201.

[64] V.3[49]6.7-8: νοῦς γὰρ καὶ νόησις ἕν· καὶ ὅλος ὅλῳ, οὐ μέρει ἄλλο μέρος; V.9[5]5.7–48, 8.3–4; V.4[7]2.46–51; VI.9[9]5.14–15V.1[10]4.21; V.3[49]5.21–48; I.8[51]2.16. In fact, Plotinus makes the subject and object of intellection both a unity and a plurality; see n. 149. See Sorabji 1982, 310–311; Sells 1994, 23; Hoffmann 1997, 342.

[65] IV.4[28]1; III.7[45]3; V.3[49]2, 5. See Sorabji 1982, 310–11.

[66] V.6[24]2-8: νοήσει [*sc.* ἡ ψυχή] δευτέρως.

otherwise the act of *noêsis* would not involve the necessary unity of intellect, intellection and intelligised. This is indeed the case, but before this point can be explained a few notes on soul are in order.

Soul

Plotinus' theory of the soul is perhaps even more perplexing than his theory of intellect; it certainly perplexed his contemporaries.[67] To begin with some basic premises of Plotinus' theory, we may say that soul is immaterial and immortal,[68] and that, while in some way connected with the material body, which is 'inside' soul,[69] its true home is *nous* and, ultimately, the One beyond being.[70] Plotinus' account of the human soul contains elements both of an Aristotelean 'faculty psychology', with various powers (δυνάμεις) capable of different functions, and a Platonic soul having different 'parts' (μέρη).[71]

There are several distinct realities which may be encompassed by the term 'soul' in Plotinus: the primary hypostasis Soul (ἡ πᾶσα ψυχή, III.9[33]3.1), the world-soul (ἡ τοῦ παντός ψυχή, IV.8[31]7.27) and the individual soul. While each of these iterations of soul has its reality in Plotinus' world, they are also all in some sense one, being fundamentally expressions or 'parts' of the hypostasis Soul.[72] As a hypostasis, Soul

[67] Porphyry relates that, early in his study under Plotinus, he once spent three consecutive days questioning the master concerning the relationship between body and soul (*Plot.* 13, 11–18).

[68] IV.7[2]10–12, discussed at Blumenthal 1971, 9–14, is a representative argument for the existence of an immaterial, immortal soul. Rist 1967b, 411–414 discusses the origins in Plato's dialogues for Plotinus' theory of soul, concentrating on *R.*, *Phdr.*, *Tim.*, *Lg.*, and *Grg;* Blumenthal notes the Aristotelean elements in Plotinus' theory (see n. 71).

[69] The soul's connection to the material body was perplexing to Plotinus himself (IV.8[31]1, cited p. 186; cf. V.3[49]6.13–18). Following Plato (*Tim.* 36e), Plotinus states that body is within soul (e.g. V.5[32]9.30 ff; IV.3[27]9.36–51, 20.14–15, 22.8–9), as is, indeed, the whole material cosmos (V.5[32]9.29–30). See Blumenthal 1971, esp. 16 ff.

[70] Every soul longs to return to the good: I.6[1]1.1-2; cf. VI.2[19]11.24-5; IV.4[28]16.26-27; V.5[32] 12.7-9.

[71] Blumenthal 1971, 20–30 notes a lack of consistency with regard to faculties and parts of soul in Plotinus, but concludes that, overall, Plotinus rejects or ignores the Platonic tripartition of the soul in treatises later than IV.3 (27th in chronological order), adopting a faculty psychology. Blumenthal theorises that such a model worked better alongside Plotinus' conviction that the soul was a fundamental unity (*ibid.* 25). However, Plotinus does not have a problem with simultaneous unity and multiplicity (as we have seen in his account of *nous*), describing soul for example as τριμερῆ and yet indivisible (IV.7[2]14.9) and as both μεριστή and ἀμεριστός (IV.2[4]1.65; cf. 2 ff.). And he never loses his conviction that the soul has a better and a worse part, the better turned toward *nous*, the worse toward matter and the body (e.g. the late treatise I.4[46]4.34-36); cf. Clark 1996, 282–3.

[72] V.1[10]10; II.9[33]8; IV.3[27]1-2; I.1[53]10.10-11. See Bréhier 1958, 64–73; Clark 1996, 285–7. The most in-depth study of the paradoxical unity and multiplicity of the soul(s) in Plotinus is Merlan 1969.

is inherently productive, and its reversion to *nous*, whereby it contemplates the beauty of the Forms and the intellectual world, actually 'generates' the world of the senses.[73] But each individual soul is really part of Soul, and indeed of *nous* (see below), and is, according to its true nature, a 'noetic cosmos'.[74] Soul is thus simultaneously the locus for individual human thoughts and actions, and a divine cosmic entity. Plotinus' philosophical concerns focus very much on the individual soul and its journey 'home' to intellect and beyond, the process of attaining to the soul's divine potential. Different souls have different qualities, some being suited by nature for the philosophic ascent (the 'winged souls' of the Platonic *Phædrus*),[75] while others are, by nature, mired in the sensory dross of the material world.[76]

Two main characteristics of the soul should be emphasised with regard to the problem of discourse about the transcendent reality, both having to do with the soul's relationship with matter and the body: the first is the difficulty the embodied soul faces in trying to escape from conceiving reality in terms of space and time, and the second is what I call Plotinus' theory of the 'indeterminate identity'.

Space and Time: Metaphor and Reality

The souls of individual humans are in a sense separate entities and in a sense manifestations of the hypostasis Soul; as will be discussed, they are also always in some way present to *nous*, and can even become identified with *nous*. However, because of their relationship with matter – a relationship which Plotinus finds it difficult to explain – they tend to be cognitively trapped at the level of *dianoia*, discursive thought, and its external analogue, speech and language. The defining characteristic of time and space is extension; extension in thought results in the necessity of placing thoughts sequentially, and considering propositions in order, just as language must form whole ideas from individual words and phrases.

For Plotinus, as we have seen, time and space are both absent from the higher aspects of reality. Concerning Plotinus' intelligible world, Bréhier

[73] On the productivity of hypostasis, see Appendix C, p. 263.

[74] III.4[46]3.21-2, 6.22-23: καὶ ἑσμὲν ἕκαστος κόσμος νοητός. This is most thoroughly discussed at II.2[19]2.3 and III.4[46]3.21 *ad fin*. and 6. Cf. V.7[18]1.9-10.

[75] I.3[20]3.2; IV.8[31]1.37; I.1[53]3.2-3, and c; citing Pl. *Phdr*. 246c. Plotinus describes philosophers as suited to the noetic ascent 'by nature', e.g. I.3[20]1.9, 3.1.

[76] E.g. I.3[20]1.6-10, citing *Phdr*. 248d1-4. It is unclear how this inequality of souls is to be squared with the doctrine of the 'undescended soul' described below, but perhaps the most simple explanation is that Plotinus regards all souls as capable of the philosophic ascent *in potentia*, but many as unable to escape the body in practice.

has said: 'Intelligence, viewed as the intelligible world, is an ideal transposition of the world of sense. It is the world of sense minus its materiality, that is to say, minus change (the eternal having replaced time) and minus the mutual exteriority of the parts.'[77] This excellent summary of a difficult aspect of Plotinus' theory of *nous* should only be corrected with regard to ontological priority: the intelligible world is not an ideal transposition of the world of sense, but the world of sense is rather a materialised and temporalised reflection of the world of intellect. Souls within time and space are severely limited in their abilities both to comprehend, and to express, higher realities.

A major factor to be considered in connection with Plotinus' ideas about ineffability, then, is the fact that language is inevitably pervaded by temporal and spatial constraints; in short, by *extension*. The primary realities can only be described in language drawing on the natural world, the world of the senses, which is essentially informed by spatial metaphors when approaching the abstract.[78] But the term 'abstract', with its etymological meaning of 'drawing out' general principles from particulars, reverses the order of events for Plotinus: concrete individual bodies are, for Plotinus, in fact 'abstracted' from the Forms. This is a problem for the language of transcendence against which Plotinus musters a considerable arsenal of methodologies of disorientation in his attempts to shock his audience out of spatial ways of thinking.[79] The same goes, perhaps more so, for the temporal;[80] the metaphysics of the *Enneads* are shot through with sequential descriptions of the genesis of the cosmos through what is expressed as a step-by-step process, qualified or contradicted by statements which attempt to tear down the temporal structures thus created.

The 'Indeterminate Identity'

A second problem of the individual soul relates to its nature as subject. For Plotinus, the soul is the 'true self', but the embodied soul has a kind of parasitic accretion, a pseudo-self,[81] which might best be termed the 'personality',[82] acquired through its connection to matter. This pseudo-self is

[77] 1958, 92–3.

[78] V.1[10]10.7 ff; V.2[11]2.19–23; VI.8[39]11.13–28.

[79] See p. 237.

[80] See V.1[10]6.19–23; V.8[31]12.25–26; VI.7[38]35.28–9; III.7[45]6.22–27, 13.43–4; V.3[49]17.12–28 on the need for temporal language in describing atemporal processes.

[81] I.1[53]9.8. See Aubry 2008, 108.

[82] I use the modern term 'personality', which has no precise Greek equivalent, to indicate the set of characteristics which Plotinus refers to most commonly as ἤθη (see Sleeman and Pollet 1980 *s.v.*). The personality owes its characteristics to the force of necessity, which comes to bear upon

sometimes described as ἡμεῖς, 'we', a usage not unlike the modern 'ego' derived from Freudian theory.[83] Plotinus also discusses 'two men': the 'first man' is the soul in its state of perfect *noêsis*, but at some point in the ontological 'history' of anthropogenesis a 'second man' attached itself to the first, bringing with it in turn an attachment to matter and the body.[84] Plotinus doubts whether the soul in *nous* could have any memories,[85] and his theory of metempsychosis denies the survival of the personality, though not of the soul's innate excellence: Pythagoras may become Socrates in another life, but this does not make the two men the same personality.[86] The sensory experiences of a good man (that is, a philosopher) do not penetrate to his inner self,[87] nor do magical incantations, which operate only at the cosmic level, effect him.[88]

For Plotinus, then, that aspect of the human being most commonly referred to in modern discourse as the 'self' – the conscious, discursive awareness of perceptions, events and memories – has no fundamental reality, and is not coextensive with the soul, which is the true self. The soul thus has a lower self; as will be discussed later on, it also has a higher self, through its ability to attain to union with the world-soul, with Soul, with *nous* and even, in some sense, with the One. The soul's identity is thus indeterminate, and '… there is no point at which one may determine one's own limits, so as to say "so far it is I"'.[89] The consequences for discourse here are fascinating: on the one hand, when Plotinus says 'I', whom are we to understand to be the speaker? On the other hand, what does it mean

soul when it descends into the world of matter, and another principle, the soul or self proper, is ontologically anterior to this descent (see e.g. II.3[20]9). On the 'self' in Plotinus see in the first instance Dodds (1960a); O'Daly 1973; Armstrong 1977; Remes 2007; Aubry 2008.

[83] Dodds 1960b, 5. On the Plotinian ἡμεῖς, see Oosthout 1991, 31–42; Aubry 2008. The term ἡμεῖς may take its origin from the pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus* (365e), where, however, the term refers to the soul (Oosthout 1991, 33 n. 1).

[84] VI.4[22]14 – 5 *passim*. At I.4[46]13 ff. Plotinus refutes Stoic and Epicurean views on the problem of evils using this theory: pain and such are indeed evils, but they only affect the lower man, not the true self. Aubry (2008) sees the ἡμεῖς as the linkage between these 'two men'. See Clark 1996, 284–285, Smith 1978.

[85] IV.4[28]1.1.–2; cf. IV.3[27]25.14-30: since *nous* exists outside time, the concept of memory is inappropriate to its state of being, and thus to *noêsis*. See Bréhier 1958, 75–79.

[86] V.7[18]1.5–9.

[87] I.4[46]8.10–13.

[88] Plotinus attacks the Gnostics' magical practices (II.9[33]15.2–11) not as incantations (ἐπαοιδάς) *per se*, but because the Gnostics compose them not just πρὸς ψυχήν but πρὸς τὰ ἐπάνω, since this would subject the higher realities to speech and other powers proper to the lower world (cf. IV.4[28]30.28–30 ff.).

[89] Bréhier 1958, 73, citing VI.5[23]7.14–15. Cf. Armstrong 1967, 4: 'The boundaries shutting off the self from the universe are largely illusory, and disappear in the highest stages of perception'; Aubry 2008, 120.

to say that soul 'moves toward' or 'touches' the ineffable, if, in doing so, it ceases to be soul?

Many Worlds, One World

Plotinus has been characterised with some justice as a monist,[90] but it is important to specify what we mean by this term. Plotinus does not seek to prove, like Parmenides or Spinoza, that there is only one reality, but rather posits gradations of reality in direct proportion to degree of unity. The more unified something is, the more real it is, with the converse necessarily following. The One would thus be the 'most real' reality, but its reality in fact transcends reality altogether; it is 'hyperreal'. However, the hyperreal One is never disconnected from any reality; for Plotinus, all is one, and the differences which arise in this incomprehensible unity-multiplicity are best described as 'acts' of the inactive One. Every true action, for Plotinus, is of a double nature, having a component which is internal to the actor – identical with its essence – and a component which is extrinsic.[91] *Nous* is the external act of the One, and so different from its nature,[92] but at the same time, *nous* and the universe are 'inside' the One.[93]

The exposition above has presented the Plotinian universe piece by piece – such are the limits of discursive exposition. The paradoxes just stated at the end of the last paragraph illustrate this deficiency. Just as a radical unity cannot, in Plotinus' eyes, be expressed by predicative language, so the simultaneous 'event' that is the universe cannot be encompassed in any holistic account. This is not only because, for any map to be truly complete, it would have to become the territory it describes, but also because a world such as Plotinus' is, by his own admission, indescribable at the level of time and space. Any account, therefore, is bound to encounter paradoxes when viewed from that standpoint. Several of these paradoxes are explored below, with a view to approaching a better understanding of how, for Plotinus, the One is the all.

Immanence and Transcendence

The first of these is the simultaneous omnipresence and transcendence of Plotinian realities. As we have seen, Plotinus asserts the transcendent

[90] E.g. Rist 1965b.
[91] See Schroeder 1987, 679.
[92] See e.g. V.4[7]2.26–36.
[93] *Ibid.* 13–19.

unity of the One, which exceeds any numerical unity to the degree that it actually negates all number, and is beyond being and any predication whatsoever. On the other hand, all things, at whatever ontological level, are things only insofar as they themselves partake of unity; in some passages, Plotinus actually has the One, as principle of unity, 'participated in' like a Platonic Form.[94] All things of course partake of multiplicity as well, which is why the cosmos exists as it does rather than as an undifferentiated, 'silent' transcendent principle.[95] In the sense that the efficient cause of all being is the One,[96] the One can be said to be all. Plotinus also expounds the One's status as a primal cause of everything as a form of immanence-transcendence:[97] with a word-play that does not fully transfer into English, Plotinus tells us that Τὸ ἓν πάντα καὶ οὐδὲ ἕν, which we might translate as 'the One is all things and not any thing', but could also render as 'the One is all things and not [even] *"one"*', emphasising Plotinus' overarching project of denying attributes and names to the first principle.[98]

But Plotinus is also concerned to show phenomenologically how it is that, he believes, the embodied human being can attain to some kind of contact with the One.

> And again, since knowledge (γνώσεως) of other things comes to us through *nous*, and we are able to know *nous* by *nous*, by what simple apprehension (ἐπιβολῇ ἁθρόᾳ) might we grasp this, which transcends the nature of intellect? It is necessary to indicate (σημῆναι) how this is possible. We shall say 'by that in us which is like it.' For there is something of it present to us. Or, rather, there is nowhere where it is not, with regard to those things capable of participating in it.[99]

The One's immanence is specifically a presence to those beings with some aspect of the One in themselves; most importantly, it can be present to human souls who participate in unity.[100]

[94] As at V.3[49]17.8-10; III.8[51]9.19–24.

[95] The primary nature of the One is still and silent, and if there were no Otherness, all things would be in this simple silence (V.1[10]4.38–9); but, in order for all things to be, the One must be still (ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν: V.3[49]12.35–6).

[96] See n. 11.

[97] See Bussanich 1996, 50.

[98] V.2[11]1.1. Cf. Pl. *Prm*. 160b2–3.

[99] III.8[51]9.19-24. On ἐπιβολή see n. 189. Cf. VI.9[9]7.4: the One always present to those able to touch (θιγεῖν) it.

[100] Cf. VI.9[9]3.51: ἔχομεν τι παρ' αὐτοῦ.

The presence of the One is also an absence, insofar as the knowing hypostases *nous* and soul 'look away' from it and toward multiplicity and becoming. This alternation of presence and absence is discussed in more detail below, but it is well to make a preliminary note here that the choice of which realities to contemplate determines the One's presence or absence; this is one example of the way in which Plotinus' ontology is directed and preceded by the concept of contemplation. Human souls become present to *nous* or to the One beyond being by directing their contemplation thither. The traditional ontological dichotomy between immanence and transcendence is thus interwoven with the phenomenological problem of presence and absence. The two pairs of seeming oppositions cannot be separated in Plotinus.[101]

The Axiom of Continuous Hierarchy and Universal Sympathy

A further consideration which can be usefully discussed under the rubric of 'monism' is what has been called the 'axiom of continuous hierarchy'.[102] This is the principle that there can be no breaks in the chain of being, which can be seen as a metaphysical expression of the axiom that 'like is known by like'. The One or Good is remote and transcendent when regarded from the point of view of the material world; yet it is intimately linked with that world by a seamless flow of intermediary entities: 'Nothing is separated or cut off from that which precedes it.'[103] This is often expressed by the term συνουσία and the verb συνεῖναι, which can signify the integral wholeness of each reality, its 'vertical' connection to the realities above it, or the relationship between the product and its producer (i.e. Soul's relationship to *nous*).[104]

I argue below that, for Plotinus the answer to this problem lies not in a proliferation of internal dynamics within the hypostases, as in the later Platonists, but rather in a blurring of their 'edges'. The One and *nous* overlap, as do *nous* and Soul, whence arise individual souls and material objects.[105] At no point is there a break in continuity between the most profound and the most nugatory realities; when we remember that, despite the schematic arrangement of the preceding discussion, Plotinus' reality is not a ladder

[101] Cf. Trouillard 1976, 313.
[102] Mazur 2005. Cf. Mortley 1975, 376.
[103] V.2[11]1.22: οὐδὲν δὲ τοῦ πρὸ αὐτοῦ ἀπήρτηται οὐδ' ἀποτέτμηται.
[104] Schroeder 1987, 678–9 *et passim.* On the productive function of hypostasis in Plotinus, see Appendix C, p. 261.
[105] See p. 237 ff.

or a chain, but a structured unity, we see how this results in a monist world-view. There is only one world in Plotinus, and it is fundamentally a unity beyond unity expressed, by degrees, as a multiplicity.[106]

This unity-in-multiplicity is expressed in the cosmos (that is, the sublunary sensory world of change and coming-to-be) by cosmic sympathy (συμπάθεια). All things are interconnected by unseen links, not at random, but appropriately each according to its nature.[107] Every soul is connected through sympathy with all parts of the cosmos.[108] Plotinus' theory of sensation is based on sympathy: both sight and hearing occur, not through a medium, but through sympathy between the sensory organs and their objects.[109] Cosmic sympathy is also what causes magical rituals to function, prayers to be answered, and, in general, provides an explanation for many occult parallels in the Plotinian cosmos.[110] The interconnectedness expressed on the macrocosmic scale by the fundamental unity-in-multiplicity of all the primary hypostases is thus mirrored on the microcosmic level, where each individual thing is connected to every other individual thing in an invisible nexus of non-causal determinations.[111]

The Doctrine of the 'Undescended Soul'

Plotinus states that the soul is always connected with the higher realities (*viz*. Intellect, but with the potential for attaining to the One in some indescribable fashion as well),[112] while at the same time being manifest in (or more accurately, manifesting) the world of the senses.[113] The highest part of Soul, for Plotinus, has never left *nous*;[114] in fact, when man stops being 'man' and becomes *nous*, he is most fully himself.[115] 'For we are not cut off from it, even now.'[116]

This doctrine removes any ceiling from the heights to which the indeterminate self may aspire; the human soul is potentially any higher reality,

[106] Cf. Deck 1967, 110.
[107] VI.7[38]2.32–6.
[108] III.4[46]6.21–30.
[109] IV.5[29], *On Sight*; on hearing, *ibid*. 5.19-31. Plotinus accepts a medium for sight at V.5[32]7, but seemingly as an illustrative metaphor (cf. Armstrong 2003 n. 1 *ad loc.*).
[110] Magical rites effective through sympathy: IV.9[5]3.4–5; IV.4[28]26, 35, 40 *ad fin;* I.4[46]9.1ff. See p. 133 for the Egyptian sages' animation of statues through sympathy. On Plotinus' theory of magic, see Merlan 1953, 344–345; Mazur 2003.
[111] Rappe 2000, 37–41.
[112] See p. 208.
[113] IV.7[2]13.16 ff; V.1[10]10.13–18; VI.2[19]22.31–3; IV.8[31]8.2 ff; ; II.9[33]1.57–63, 2 *passim*; IV.3[27]12.4–5. See also I.6[1]2.7–11.
[114] III.3[20]5.16-18; cf. II.5[36]3.31-3; III.4[46]3.21-8.
[115] Cf. Armstrong 1967, 4–5. On 'becoming *nous*' see further p. 202.
[116] VI.4[22]14.21-2: οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐδὲ νῦν ἀποτετμήμεθα.

with the proviso that it may cease to be soul in becoming that reality. Its relevance for discourse will become apparent in the following section, to which we now turn.

Modes of Knowing in Plotinus

Knowing and Being in Plotinus[117]

Reference was made above to the way in which the ontological dichotomy between immanence and transcendence corresponds in Plotinus to the phenomenological pair of presence and absence. This is because the conceptual realms of ontology and epistemology are simply not separate for Plotinus;[118] or, at least, not separate at the level of intellect.[119] How could they be, when 'to intelligise is to be', and when the highest being, *nous*, is also a faculty of consciousness? It has been observed with some justice that Plotinus is the earliest known philosopher fully to equate levels of being with states of consciousness,[120] and the section which follows, outlining the modes of consciousness as theorised by Plotinus, will be seen to correspond intimately with the ontological schema outlined in the previous sections.

It should be emphasised that this is not a case of parallelism, of ontological realities and cognitive realities mirroring one another. Rather, *cognitive and ontological descriptions are both possibilities in describing the Plotinian realities*; they are differing, partial descriptions of concepts which cannot, by their nature, be succinctly described through discursive language. *Nous* is an intelligible world, and also acts as a faculty of *noêsis*; but there is only one *nous*, which is both of these things. The discussion will now take a phenomenological turn. Plotinus wants his readers to understand higher realities, but, as I will argue in the following section, this understanding is valued chiefly as a propædeutic to *living* these realities.

The discussion which follows concentrates on discerning what kinds of consciousness Plotinus believes to be available to human beings, but it is worth noting here, in the spirit of the previous section's emphasis on the unity of the Plotinian world, that the entire universe, for Plotinus,

[117] Useful studies of modes of knowing in Plotinus, and on the limits of knowledge and language with regard to the transcendent include Meijer 1992, 164–8; Hoffmann 1997, 355–6; Turner 2001, 481–4; Emilsson 2007.

[118] Cf. Mortley 1975, 370; Rappe 2000, 25–44; Mazur 2010, 33.

[119] Cf. Emilsson 2007, 2.

[120] Bréhier 1958, 192–5. Cf. Perl 2006, 9 n. 25.

is conscious. Contemplation (θεωρία) is an ontological and epistemological function of the Plotinian universe. Plotinus' theory, which has been called 'contemplationist metaphysics',[121] states that all realities contemplate; specifically, they contemplate the reality which precedes them (*nous* contemplates the One, Soul *nous* and so on), and the contemplation *generates the reality which follows it* (i.e., Soul is generated by the contemplation of the One by intellect).[122] Plotinus' metaphysics (and even his physics) are thus predicated upon a kind of consciousness – contemplation – which has an ontological result – generation.[123] 'All things strive for contemplation', and 'contemplation is coming-to-be'.[124] The fact that Plotinus' universe constantly generates itself through contemplating itself is one way in which the terms ontology and epistemology fall short of describing what Plotinus means.

This applies at the cosmic level as well. Allusion was made earlier to the interconnectedness of the Plotinian universe through cosmic sympathy. As we might expect from the universal contemplation in the Plotinian universe, the term 'sympathy' (συμπάθεια) retains, for Plotinus, at least some of the experiential force of its etymological root in the word πάθειν, 'to undergo, experience'; individual parts of the cosmos are in some way conscious of each other, hence their innate mutual response to each other. This is underlined by Plotinus' use of the word συναίσθησις almost as a synonym for συμπάθεια, and in similar contexts.[125]

The discussion which follows on the modes of knowing refers mainly to the modes through which the individual soul comes to 'know' the primordial principles whence it arises, but should be contextualised in terms of the larger Plotinian world, which is a network of interconnected self-knowledge, the parts contemplating the whole and aware of each other through cosmic sympathy.

Discursive Indirect Knowing

For Plotinus, as for the Middle Platonists, 'discursivity' (διέξοδος), the necessity for both speech and reason to deal with problems sequentially, is a primary logical reason for the exclusion of both thought and speech

[121] Gatti 1996, 33.
[122] III.8[51] *passim*; II.9[33]2.13-15. See Deck 1967, esp. 93–109; Gatti 1996, 31–2.
[123] See Bréhier 1958, 166; Gatti 1996, 31–4. Cf. Armstrong 2003 n. 1 to III.8[51]7.15-28.
[124] III.8[51]1.2-3: πάντα θεωρίας ἐφίεσθαι καὶ εἰς τέλος τοῦτο βλέπειν; III.8[51]5.1-2: θεωρία ἡ γένεσις.
[125] Noted by Schroeder 1987, 684, referencing IV.4[28]24.21-22, 45.8. On συναίσθησις in Plotinus see *ibid*. 682.

from the highest reaches of reality.[126] As we have seen, that which is perfectly simple cannot be comprehended by a divided mode of cognition, no matter how closely it approximates unity; we must not make the One multiple, even in thought.[127] Both *dianoia* and *logismos* are forms of discursive thought.[128] Blumenthal has shown that the faculties called *dianoëtikon* and *logistikon* actually pertain to the same power of discursive thought in the soul; the former is the more general term and the latter tends to refer specifically to the style of dialectical reasoning pursued by philosophers.[129] As might be expected from the foregoing, the soul engages in discursive thinking (and its linguistic externalisation) only in the cosmos; the soul separated from the body does not.[130]

Discursive thought, for Plotinus, is by no means empty of meaning; just as the things and events encountered in the world of bodies and of the senses are multiple and incomplete reflections of their unified, integral archetypes, so the thoughts of *dianoia* are fragmentary, sequential glimpses of the eternal truths of *noêsis.* The soul in the cosmos must engage in *dianoia*. But if *dianoia* is to contain any truth, it must somehow partake of *noêsis*, the cognition of the Forms themselves.

Plotinus expresses the presence of *noêsis* to the embodied soul in several different ways. In one place he asserts a faculty of *phantasia* as a mediator between *nous* and the discursive mind, a faculty of soul which enables the 'translation' of eternal archetypes into temporalised and materialised forms of thought.[131] But *nous* functioning within souls is sometimes described as a second, subsidiary *nous* to the '*nous* above',[132] known as 'dividing intellect' (μερίζων νοῦς),[133] the 'inner intellect' (ὁ ἔνδον νοῦς),[134] or the soul's own

[126] For διέξοδος, see V.9[5]7.9-11; VI.2[19]21.27-28; V.8[31]6.7–12; VI.6[34]16.23; cf. III.7[45]11.22–25.
[127] V.8[31]13.3.
[128] It should be noted here that Plotinus is known for a certain terminological sloppiness (cf. e.g. Blumenthal 1971, 43 n. 23; 104 ff.), and that he sometimes refers to discursive thought with the verb νοεῖν, falling into the more normal way of speaking rather than the technical philosophic register. It is generally easy to see when this occurs (e.g. at II.4[46]5.4 ff.).
[129] Blumenthal 1971, 100–11. Cf. Oosthout 1991, 83–84. This book uses the more common *dianoia* as a general term, with the understanding that *logismos* and any other discursive mode of thinking is to be taken as covered by this label.
[130] IV.3[27]18.1–19: neither the world-soul nor human souls that have departed this life engage in reasoning. VI.7[38]9.9–10: the human being in *nous* is ontologically 'prior to reasoning' (ἐκεῖ δὲ ὁ πρὸ τοῦ λογίζεσθαι). Interestingly, the planetary gods, who also exist in the cosmos 'below' the level of *nous*, engage, like humans, in λογισμοῖς (IV.4[28]31.51).
[131] IV.3[27]30.1–16. On *phantasia* in Plotinus, see Lloyd 1990, 142.
[132] V.3[49]2. This passage makes it clear that the lower intellect is not characterised by perfect self-knowledge like its more elevated counterpart.
[133] V.9[5]8.20–23; cf. 9, 1–2.
[134] V.3[49]14.14–15.

intellect (νοῦν οἰκεῖον ἐχούσης [sc. ψυχῆς]).[135] Plotinus also describes the function of *noêsis* in *dianoia* as a 'state' (ἕξις) of the soul, whereby *noêsis* informs *dianoia*.[136] Discursive thought can thus be true thought, but at one remove from the unmediated self-apprehension that is *noêsis*, showing the image of *noêsis* 'as in a mirror'.[137] He elsewhere proposes a model whereby the absolute truths of *nous* are 'filtered' through discursive thought, resulting in a fragmented 'trace' (ἴχνος) of *noêsis* at the level of the soul, which makes true discourses possible.[138] Statements of partial truths are possible; truth itself, however, resides in *nous*, beyond discourse. At the same time, *nous* bleeds into the world of discourse, its transcendence always balanced by presence. 'Indeed it [sc. *nous*] is ours and not ours. That is why we make use of it and do not make use of it – whereas reason we always use – and it is ours when we use it, but when we do not use it, it is not ours.'[139] Altogether, Plotinus' accounts of the relationship between discursive thought and *nous* propound a number of mutually contradictory viewpoints, a point returned to in the following chapter.

Language and Discursive Thought

Speech, for Plotinus as for Plato in the *Sophist*, is an externalised form of discursive thought[140] (and discursive thought is sometimes described as an interior dialogue),[141] and human souls in intellect have no need of it, although they do communicate.[142] for Plotinus, the truth of a linguistic statement can be considered as separate from the words themselves: 'let him abandon the verbal signification and grasp the meaning of what is being said'.[143] This statement both implies great limits to the power of language as a transmitter of truth, and also paradoxically exalts it as a kind

[135] V.2[11]2.9-10; cf. V.3[49]2–4.

[136] I.1[53]8.2. Cf. V.9[5]3.21–24, 33–37.

[137] IV.3[27]30.8–11. Cf. Heiser 1991, 25–26; Turner 2001, 483.

[138] E.g. V.3[49]3.10–12. This trace is also sometimes called 'a kind of imprint' (V.3[49]2.10: οἷον τοὺς τύπους). This is in fact a very elegant solution to the ancient problem of the manner in which the Forms make discourse possible while remaining outside the constraints of time and coming-to-be.

[139] V.3[49]3.26–29, trans. Oosthout.

[140] Pl. *Sph*. 263e; cf. *Tht.* 189e-190a. V.1[10]3.7-10; I.2[19]3.27–30; VI.8[39]9.2-3 characterise speech as an externalised form of thought. See Mortley 1986, I, 115; Hoffmann 1997, 367–378; O'Meara 1998, 154–155. The relationship between discursive thinking and language in Plotinus has been ably set out by Heiser (1991), reasoning carefully from Platonic passages on which we know Plotinus drew and from the Enneadic texts themselves.

[141] VI.9[9]10.6–7 and V.3[49]3.3–4.

[142] Cf. Hoffmann 1997, 346–7. Plotinus denies that there is speech (φωνή) at the level of *nous* (IV.3[27]18.13-24), but he believes that there is communication there, and communication of a superior type: thus, 'all of the things that are said there are beautiful images' (V.8[31]5.21–22; cf. IV.3[27]18.20–22) rather than mere words. See further n. 157.

[143] VI.4[22]2.11–12.

of vessel from which the truths of *nous*, the 'meaning', may be extracted. Another way of looking at this problem is by contrasting the self-certifying knowledge of *nous*, which 'is what it says it is', with the language of difference that is discourse, referring as it always does to objects outside the linguistic system.[144] Plotinus shows at times a striking degree of doubt as to the truth-claims of language, and yet the fact of his teaching and writing remain to show that he did not believe discourse to be futile.

The Limits of Discursivity

The limits of discursivity, as Plotinus sees them, have already been touched on. The constraints of time and space on *dianoia* are two such: these are phenomena of soul, and do not exist in *nous* or beyond *nous*. A further constraint is the discursive mind's inability to think total unity. Plotinus reasons that any cognition, no matter how unified, must have at least a thinker and a thought, and thus involve multiplicity.[145] The soul tries to fasten on the formless (ἀνείδεον) 'but slides away and fears it may have nothing'.[146] Plotinus also denies the efficacy of *dianoia* to comprehend higher realities by arguing 'from the top down': there is no discursivity in *nous*, so discursivity cannot apprehend the things 'there'.[147]

For Plotinus, since *dianoia* cannot grasp the One, when we 'speak' the One, we are actually 'speaking ourselves', our own affections or experiences (πάθη).[148] Similar limits apply to *nous*, as we shall see; it grasps not the One itself, but a multiple image of the One. This is an important aspect of the way in which Plotinus conceives of the attempt to express the ineffable: every attempt at such expression in fact expresses the speaker, the 'subject' of discourse perpetually eluding capture.

That said, the One is never absent, since all things are things insofar as they partake of oneness.[149] Thus, the One should in some way be present to discursive thought. In some treatises Plotinus is willing to concede a certain indirect knowledge of the One even to *dianoia*, insofar as all things participate in unity, and have thus a connection, however attenuated, with

[144] Sorabji 1983, 152; Lloyd 1986, 259; Rappe 2000, 156; Turner 2001, 482.

[145] This is a delicate point for Plotinus, and one which results in certain paradoxical statements; he wishes, following Aristotle, to make the intellect and its intellection a single phenomenon, but also insists on a certain multiplicity in such an arrangement, especially when compared with the ultimate unity that is the One. See Emilsson 2007, 18.

[146] VI.9[9]3.4–6.

[147] Argued by Rappe 2000, 35 ff. based on V.8[31]7.

[148] VI.9[9]3.49–54.

[149] VI.9[9]1.1.

the primordial unity.[150] However, the fact that the soul is able somehow to apprehend the One because 'it has something of the One in it'[151] generally takes place in Plotinian narrative at a stage where the soul has ceased to exercise *dianoia*, and come to exercise, or rather, to be, *noêsis*. I say 'generally'; I argue in the following chapter that the presence and absence of the One at the level of *dianoia* are in fact indeterminate, apophatic options in Plotinus.

Non-Discursive Indirect Knowing

Noêsis

Scholars have argued over whether or not *noêsis*, as Plotinus conceives it, is possible or coherent, sometimes pushing Plotinus' theory quite far in the attempt and losing some of the subtleties of his argumentation.[152] Others, I would argue, have brought *noêsis* too close to discursive thought, finding its non-discursive traces in Plotinus' metaphors and other non-literal techniques of writing, as a kind of non-verbal element of normal discourse.[153] Both approaches may be argued for on the basis of a chosen selection of Plotinus' writings, since almost any statement he makes about *noêsis* in one place is contradicted, or at least modified, elsewhere in the *Enneads*.[154] What, then, can we say about *noêsis*?

Noêsis is a faculty of cognition, engaged in both by souls and by *nous* itself. Plotinus most commonly likens *noêsis* to a form of synoptic vision, in contradistinction to a form of thinking.[155] Plato's opposition of *nous* and *dianoia*, whereby *nous* does not deal with sensible images and can rise above hypotheses to the Form of the good,[156] certainly influenced Plotinus' account, and holds true for Plotinus' thought,[157] allowing for

[150] V.3[49]14 makes the case for the One's presence and absence at the level of *dianoia*. Cf. VI.8[39]16.1–3.

[151] VI.7[38]31.8–9.

[152] E.g. Sorabji 1982. There has been considerable scholarly debate as to whether non-discursive thought, for Plotinus, is also non-propositional thought. This debate has mainly been carried out in Lloyd 1969–70; Sorabji 1982; Lloyd 1986; Alfino 1989; Emilsson 2007, 176–213, and centred especially on *Enn*. V.5[32]1.30. It should be emphasised that there has been some confusion between the question of whether non-propositional thought is possible at all, and whether non-propositional thought is what Plotinus means to indicate by *noêsis* (e.g. Lloyd 1969–70; Sorabji 1982), clearly two separate questions. Plotinus may or may not be positing something impossible when he theorises *noêsis* as he does; this is largely irrelevant for historians of his thought (cf. Dillon 2008, 248).

[153] E.g. Rappe 2000, 3; cf. 20 *et passim*.

[154] Cf. Emilsson 2007, 18.

[155] E.g. VI.7[38]7.17–31.

[156] Pl. *R.* 510b, 511a ff. On the truth-claims of *nous* in Plato, see Brisson 1997.

[157] V.8[31]5.19-25: 'We should by no means suppose that either the gods or the most blessed ones there see propositions (ἀξιώματα ὁρᾶν); rather, the things said there are fair images (καλὰ ἀγάλματα),

the later philosopher's distinctive metaphysics.[158] So *noêsis* deals with its objects non-representationally: it does not intelligise about Forms; it 'intelligises Forms'.[159] Moreover, whatever the contents of its intellection, it does not intelligise them one-by-one, but in a synoptic or holistic manner, so that, despite the varied nature of the Forms, its comprehension of them, in a given act of intellection, is instantaneous and lacks no detail or nuance.[160] The Forms, as we have seen, are inside *nous*; all *noêsis* is thus self-apprehension.[161]

Noêsis is thus *a priori* always true; for how could any error creep in between an instantaneous, unified, holistic act of direct apprehension and its apprehender, especially as the two are unified in the act of apprehension?[162] For Plotinus, self-apprehension is the most sound form of apprehension, as only self-apprehension can be said to be direct apprehension, rather than apprehension mediated by images.[163] Truth in *nous* is 'what it says it is'.[164]

Turning Toward Nous

This presence of *nous* is to be cultivated. The philosopher is exhorted to 'move toward' *nous*; to leave behind the world of *dianoia* and to 'turn inward' toward the noetic universe, therein to dwell, contemplating the eternal verities.[165] In some passages, Plotinus says that the soul, in focusing its consciousness in *nous*, becomes or is unified with *nous*.[166] In this case,

such as one would imagine to be in the soul of a wise man, images not of written characters, but beings (οὐ γεγραμμένα, ἀλλὰ ὄντα). This is why the ancients said that the Forms are beings and essences.' Cf. V.5[32]1.38 ff: the realities in *nous* are not πρότασεις, ἀξιώματα, or λεκτά, but Forms themselves.

158 To reiterate, Plotinus' One is 'the Good', but no longer the Form of the Good; to call it a Form would place it within *nous*, which Plotinus does not wish to do, and would also make it unequivocably a νοητόν, which is a problem he struggles with (see p. 205).

159 The verb νοεῖν in this sense is transitive and takes a simple direct object, like ἰδεῖν (see Perl 2006, 3–4); for the Hellenic mind generally, then, *noêsis* was an act conceived of as a direct apprehension of its objects of intellection. However, Plotinus' approach to intellect results in a mind which literally becomes its thought; its action (ἐνέργεια) is its being (οὐσία). Hence, the absolute truth-claim discussed below. Mortley 1986, I, 61–76 is a good overview of Hellenic thinking on the faculty of *noêsis*, and of Plotinus' particular take on this tradition.

160 See Bussanich 1996, 39.

161 Most strongly formulated at V.3[49]1. See Sorabji 1982, 311; Emilsson 2007, 77–78.

162 VI.9[9]5.12-13; V.5[32]1.1-2, 2.16. See e.g. Bussanich 1996, 39.

163 This has been called the 'identity theory of truth' (Rappe 2000, xiii) or the 'internality thesis' (Emilsson 1996, 238–9). On self-apprehension in Plotinus, see Deck 1967, 20; Oosthout 1991, 75–82; Emilsson 2007, 124–170. Cf. *ibid*. 10.35; V.5[32]2.18–20. Cf. Hoffmann 1997, 342.

164 V.3[49]5.25: τὴν ἄρα ἀλήθειαν οὐχ ἑτέρου εἶναι δεῖ, ἀλλ' ὃ λέγει, τοῦτο καὶ εἶναι.

165 V.1[10]12.13–14: εἰς τὸ εἴσω ἐπιστρέφειν, κἀκεῖ ποιεῖν τὴν προσοχὴν ἔχειν.

166 E.g. VI.5[23]12.16-25; IV.4[28]2.27–30; VI.7[38]35.4; V.3[49]4–5. See Bussanich 1996, 56.

Plotinus indicates that the soul, in the act of being *nous*, ceases to be soul; in gaining its truer nature, it loses its less true, temporary identity.[167] Otherwise, it follows, the soul could not truly know *nous*, since its knowledge would not be self-knowledge, but knowledge of an image.

However this is understood, it is clearly depicted as a practical and desired result of philosophical practice; that is to say, however difficult to comprehend we find Plotinus' conception of *noêsis*, it is propounded as a real option for the philosopher, to be sought out and cultivated. We have seen Plotinus offer his own experience as an example; he describes having dwelt timelessly within *nous*, and his subsequent bafflement upon 'returning to the body', attempting to make sense of the noetic experience upon his return to the limits of time and space.[168] But we should bear in mind that *nous* is the same world as that of the senses, but without time and space; the soul in *nous* senses, touches and communicates with the world around her in some way.[169] This is clearly paradoxical at the level of discursive logic. This does not trouble Plotinus: he does not expect the soul, in its state of isolation in the relative unreality of the cosmos, to be able to conceive the truth of *noêsis* in its fullness.

Speaking About Noêsis

The contrast between *noêsis* and *dianoia* is a constantly recurring theme, especially in Enneads Five and Six, often expressed ontologically through the dichotomy of 'here' and 'there'. More than the ineffable One itself, the state of *noêsis*, barred from discursive treatment by its very nature but at the same time central to any and all discursive formulations (since without *noêsis*, there could be no *dianoia*),[170] seems to inhabit a space just beyond the pages of Plotinus' text. Every reference to this state is in a sense a negative statement, since it can never be described; or rather, while it is conceived as a completely direct, completely open revelation of truth, it can never be fully *translated* into the language of the embodied soul. This being the

[167] V.3[49]4.7–13, 29–31. *Nous* is once described (V.1[10]11.9–13) as 'a kind of other self' (οἷον ἄλλον αὐτόν).

[168] IV.8[31]1.1–11, cited p. 186. Porphyry supports Plotinus' claims with corroborative testimony, discussed in Chapter 2 p. 45.

[169] The relationship between the noetic *aisthesis*, *noêsis* and *theoria* has yet to be explained in a comprehensive way. It may be that Plotinus' terminological imprecision results in an impression of multiple faculties where he actually means to indicate aspects of a single phenomenon, or it may be that he was himself unsure about the precise relation between these different faculties. Alternately, he may have seen the problem as insoluble at the level of discourse.

[170] As discussed p. 198.

case, it is no wonder that the state of contact with the One is ineffable. As Plotinus says, 'There is nothing wonderful in the difficulty of saying it [i.e. the nature of the One], when it is not easy to say what being or Form are; but we do have *gnôsis* based on the Forms.'[171] Being mindful of the ontological-epistemological overlap in Plotinus' philosophy, we see how this remark applies to modes of knowing as much as to types of beings.

Is *noêsis*, then, ineffable? There are many passages in Plotinus which suggest that *nous* itself cannot be accurately described through language. Discursive thinking and language deal in images, and thus cannot represent *nous*: 'What image could one form of it in itself'?[172] We also recall the multiple, mutually contradictory accounts of the way in which the soul is supposed to engage with *nous* cited on page 198; it is a state of soul, a faculty of soul, a subsidiary *nous* within soul, an aspect of soul that is itself *nous*. The noetic cannot be summed up in a few simple sentences or doctrines; it must be approached through multiple, tentative discursive approaches, since any one discursive approach cannot, by definition, comprehend its nature.[173] This, in my reading, accounts for the paradoxical statements which Plotinus makes about *nous*: *nous* is both a unity and multiple, it is nowhere and everywhere, it is both present and absent to the soul; it must be sought but requires no seeking.[174] These are best read, not as paradoxes eternally clashing, but as contradictory statements intended to point toward a synthesis on a higher level of reality;[175] if we make the effort of removing time and space from our thinking, and remember the indeterminate nature of the Plotinian self, it becomes easier to see how these paradoxes might be understood as paradoxical *only to the embodied soul*.[176]

But are we to say that the function of *nous*, *noêsis*, is also inherently ineffable, or at least not susceptible to a fully coherent account, at the level of *dianoia* and language? I would argue that the difficulties mentioned at the beginning of this section, where scholars have been tempted either to force *nous* into a non-contradictory mould or to reduce its strangeness and find in it something not so different from everyday consciousness, point us

[171] VI.9[9]3.1–3.
[172] V.8[31]3.11: τίνα ἂν οὖν εἰκόνα τις αὐτοῦ λάβοι·
[173] III.5[36]9.26–9; VI.7[38]35.28-30. Cf. Bussanich 1997, 5315.
[174] *Nous* a unity-in-multiplicity: see n. 48. Nowhere and everywhere: see n. 49. Present and absent: see n. 50. *Nous* seeks: V.3[49]10.50–1. *Nous* does not seek: V.1[10]4.16; V.3[49]4.18–19, 5.22.
[175] Cf. Emilsson 2007, 18, who shows an awareness of the contradictory nature of *nous* in Plotinus, and also seeks to account for it in terms of the limits of language.
[176] Cf. Bussanich 1997, 5315.

in this direction; as I argue in the following chapter, Plotinus' conflicting accounts of *nous* and *noêsis* are best understood as an apophatic exercise of unprecedented scope. This is not because *nous* is absolutely ineffable in the radical sense in which the One is, but because it cannot be fully conceived by discursivity (and thus language, which amounts to the same thing as far as the practice of discourse is concerned). This reading does not defuse the difficulty of the problem of *nous* in Plotinus, but it allows our accounts of Plotinus' philosophy to appreciate his internal contradictions as intentional and irreducible. He is giving an account, insofar as possible, of that which transcends accounts.

The Limits of Intellect

Noêsis is never wrong, and always true. It is, however, limited by its internal multiplicity from apprehending the One in its radical unity; for Plotinus, no cognition, even self-cognition, can directly grasp the perfectly simple.[177] To be sure, the highest element of *nous* contemplates the One, but in a 'multiple manner': 'This is why intellect, which is multiple, desires to intelligise that which is beyond it, which is itself one, but wishing to reach it in its simplicity, always ends up apprehending something within itself, and [thus] made multiple.'[178] *Nous* is thus only an indirect mode of knowing, a way-station on the path to the ultimate reality, which transcends both *epistêmê* and *noêsis*.[179]

Such is Plotinus' normal approach to the limits of *noêsis*. However, in the early Treatise 7 he states that the One, as object of *nous*' contemplation, is a νοητόν.[180] This is an unusual position for Plotinus,[181] and has been seen by some as evidence of an evolution in his thought from an earlier stance, something like that of Numenius, of the One as a kind of transcendent intellect, toward his later, more radical belief in its total transcendence of intellect.[182] I address this passage in the following chapter, where I read it, instead, as one of a number of formally false statements which Plotinus makes about the One which are intended to be read intertextually, their mutual contradiction serving to open up a cognitive space in the reader that is undetermined.

[177] V.1; V.3[49]10–11; VI.9[9]
[178] V.3[49]11.1–4. Cf. III.8[51]8.31; VI.7[38]15.
[179] VI.9[9]4.1–3.
[180] V.4[7]2.13.
[181] Cf. Armstrong 2003, V, 138.
[182] On the relations between different intellects in Numenius, see Armstrong 1967, 7–9.

A Kind of Direct Knowing of the Transcendent?

We have seen the ways in which *noêsis* penetrates the realm of discursive thinking, despite the limits inherent in the latter. Similarly, at the limits of *noêsis* we find a subtle and highly abstruse doctrine of the ability for this form of cognition to transcend its own limits and somehow to grasp, perceive, or touch the One. Plotinus speaks in several passages of a 'higher intellect',[183] sometimes described topographically as the highest point in the noetic world, through which the ascending philosopher will have first travelled.[184]

At this stage in his epistemological schema Plotinus begins to employ apophatic formulations in earnest. This intellect is a '*nous* which is not *nous*',[185] which may equally be described as a pre-noetic principle within the One itself.[186] It has an intellectual power when viewing its own contents, but when it contemplates that which is beyond it, its mode of cognition is described as a seeing[187] or even a touching[188] rather than as *noêsis*. Plotinus also uses words denoting cognition of sorts, but foreign to the Platonist tradition,[189] again, one assumes, seeking ways to describe an apprehension which is not an apprehension by avoiding the usual terms for describing cognitions.[190] *Nous*, to apprehend the One, must cease to be *nous*.[191]

> So it hastened toward it [*sc*. the One] not as *nous*, but as a vision not yet seeing, but returned having something which it itself made multiple. Thus it longed for one thing, having some indeterminate image [of it] in itself, but left having something else, which it had made many in itself. For it has an impression of the sight [which it saw]; otherwise it would not have made it possible for it to arise within itself. But this became many from one, and,

[183] See VI.9[9]3.26–7, the most purified and primary *nous*, and further below. On this 'higher *nous*' in Plotinus see Rist 1964a; Mazur 2010, 7–8.

[184] I.3[20]1.16-18: εἰς τὸ ἔσχατον τοῦ τόπου ἀφίκωνται, ὃ δὴ τέλος τῆς πορείας ὂν τυγχάνει, ὅταν τις ἐπ' ἄκρῳ γένηται τῷ νοητῷ; IV.8[31]1.1–11, cited p. 186.

[185] V.5[32]8.22–23.

[186] VI.8[39]18.21–22.

[187] I.6[1]7.9; VI.9[9]7.20, 9.56; V.8[31]11.2; V.5[32]8.10-12, 22-3; VI.7[38]34.13, 36.20.

[188] Many passages describe a 'touching' or contact with the One (e.g. VI.9[9]4.27, 7.4, 9.55, 11.24; V.6[24]6.21-35; VI.7[38]39.15-19; VI.8[39]11.10-13; V.3[49]10.41-4, 17.25-34). See Trouillard 1961, 434; Sorabji 1982, 312; Hoffmann 1997, 357–60; Mazur 2009.

[189] E.g. VI.7[38]35.19-23: Καὶ τὸν νοῦν τοίνυν τὴν μὲν ἔχειν δύναμιν εἰς τὸ νοεῖν, ᾗ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ βλέπει, τὴν δέ, ᾗ τὰ ἐπέκεινα αὐτοῦ ἐπιβολῇ τινι καὶ παραδοχῇ, καθ' ἣν καὶ πρότερον ἑώρα μόνον καὶ ὁρῶν ὕστερον καὶ νοῦν ἔσχε καὶ ἔν ἐστι.; cf. III.8[51]9.21-2: ἐπιβολῇ ἀθρόᾳ. Ἐπιβολή and παραδοχή are both outside the standard lexicon of Platonist terms for cognition (Rist 1973, 81–2).

[190] Cf. Sorabji 1982, 313.

[191] VI.7[38]35; III.8[51]9, 32.

> knowing it, it saw itself, and then became a seeing vision. It is already *nous*, when it possesses this [*sc.* the multiple image of the One], and possesses it as *nous*; but before it was only a longing and a formless vision. So this *nous* cast its apprehension toward it, and grasping it, became *nous*, perpetually lacking [it] and becoming *nous* and being and *noêsis*, when it intelligised; for before this there was no *noêsis*, since it had no *noêton*, nor was there *nous*, it having not yet engaged in *noêsis*.[192]

There is thus in Plotinus, as in the *Chaldæan Oracles*, a faculty of *nous* which transcends the limits of *noêsis.* But *nous*' apprehension of the One is expressed indeterminately: either it reaches its goal and ceases to be intellect, or it remains intellect and attains only an interiorised, noetic reflection of its goal; its location, as within the highest point of *nous* or within the One itself, is also indeterminate. It may thus be said that Plotinus both does and does not posit a noetic faculty which can attain to the highest reality. Such a faculty exists at the highest point of *nous*, and therefore within the soul which has become unified or identified with *nous*, but in the moment of apprehension the apprehender (*nous* or the soul) ceases to be itself. This is the famous Plotinian *unio mystica*, to which we now turn.

Direct (Un)Knowing

In Chapter 2 we examined Porphyry's claim that Plotinus, among his many accomplishments, had attained to a state of union with the god 'which has neither shape nor Form, but is established above *nous* and the entire noetic [reality]'; moreover, that he had attained to this goal 'not potentially, but in ineffable reality.'[193] Porphyry's description is echoed by many passages in the *Enneads*; Plotinus describes, sometimes in considerable detail, a state entered into by the philosopher who has attained to the highest summit of *nous*. This philosopher, who has already ceased to be his individual self and become divinised through identity with *nous*, then enters yet another transformative state, one which simply cannot be described in language. Scholars have argued about whether this state should be considered an annihilation of the self,[194] or whether it should rather be seen as a union of the philosopher with the supreme principle.[195] In fact, one might term this

[192] V.3[49]11.4-16, accepting the reading ἐνδεόμενος, 'lacking', for the corrupt ἐνδιάμενος of the MSS; see note *ad loc.* H-S 1.
[193] Porph. *Plot.* 23, cited p. 45.
[194] E.g. Mazur 2010, 50–52, who sees this state of annihilation as being followed paradoxically by a state of union (see *ibid.* 58–69).
[195] E.g. Rist 1967a, 226–30, positing a nuanced form of unification of the One and the soul.

state of contact with the One as annihilation or union with equal felicity of expression: at this state of reality, Plotinus folds his language back on itself with a dynamic apophatic intensity which should leave no doubt that what he is attempting to describe is meant to be indescribable. It is at any rate certain that this state is not any kind of knowing, although it stands at the summit of the chain of modes of knowing: 'The difficulty becomes great, because our awareness of it (ἡ σύνεσις ἐκείνου) is neither through *noêsis* nor through *epistêmê*, as with other objects of intellection, but through a presence (παρουσίαν) greater than *epistêmê*.'[196]

Despite the philosophic reasons which lead Plotinus to posit such a union – contained in the whole metaphysical and epistemological framework which he inherited and developed from the Platonist tradition – there is nothing in Plato or in Middle Platonism remotely like his descriptions of the moment of contact with the supreme principle.[197] Certain Platonic passages are clear sources of inspiration for Plotinus – the 'mysteries of Diotima' from the *Symposium* is an essential source for Plotinus' account of the ascent, as are passages from the *Parmenides* and *Republic* – but there is nothing like Plotinus' first-person descriptions in Plato. In fact, Plotinus' approach to the ineffability of the transcendent first principle has much stronger parallels with earlier Platonising religious materials than with the Platonist tradition *sensu stricto*; we find strong parallels with his account of contact with the One in Platonising Gnostic texts and perhaps in the *Hermetica*.[198] What are we to make of this?

As discussed in Chapter 1, the concepts 'mysticism' and 'mystical experience' are of limited help here. If there is anything which can be certainly said about this ineffable state of being (or non-being), we must find it in Plotinus' texts, even if all that we find are inadequate words pointing at something beyond their power to express. We may begin, then by looking at what Plotinus definitely tells us about the encounter with the One.

196 VI.9[9]4.1-3.

197 With regard to Middle Platonism, this lack of evidence might of course be an accident of textual survival. Numenius and Celsus, in particular, would seem to be good candidates for such an approach to the final ontological/epistemological state, to judge from the direct modes of unknowing which we know that they posited. Numenius' probable engagement with the *Chaldæan Oracles* (see p. 106), too, would add likelihood to such a speculation, but speculation it must remain barring new evidence.

198 Zeke Mazur has put forward detailed arguments that the source of Plotinus' account of the ascent toward and union with the One is in fact Sethian Gnosticism (Mazur 2010). Mazur's arguments are perhaps not provable, but at least demonstrate beyond any doubt that there were connections between Plotinus' thought and that of the Sethian Gnostics.

We have seen that the highest level of *nous* ceases to be *nous* upon contacting the One. We have also seen that the soul, in pursuing the noetic ascent, ceases to be soul and becomes *nous*. The *nous* in question, then, which ceases to be itself and becomes something unnamed which sees, approaches, or touches the One, may well be the philosopher himself, having undergone radical transformations during the ascent toward the first principle. These successive transformations are the framework within which to understand the idea that the soul 'becomes one' with the good. The human self will have ceased to be itself before it attains to the One. It will, in some passages, have undergone a process of radical simplification or auto-unification, so that it is like the One enough somehow to become present to it,[199] while in other passages it will have become 'silent' like the One, and thus able to attain to it.[200] This said, the philosopher will find himself returned to the body after this timeless moment of transformation, which, from the perspective of time and space, is perceived as of brief duration.[201]

We have seen that Plotinus, at the level of *nous*, begins to employ apophatic language and paradox. His descriptions of the direct unknowing of the One take paradox and self-contradiction much further, as explored in the following chapter. In addition, we have seen straightforward statements of the One's ineffability, and references to the fact that the experience of the One cannot be spoken. While Plotinus' accounts of the noetic world, or of *noêsis*, contain self-contradictions at the level of *dianoia* – that is, sequential consciousness cannot comprehend the paradoxical nature of *noêsis* – contact with the One is formally stated not only to be unsayable, but ungraspable by *nous*. We recall that the true meaning of the initiatory secret in the mysteries, as interpreted by Plotinus, is that the nature of the One cannot be spoken.[202] The vision of the One is attended by speechlessness and an utter lack of thought: 'What, then, could anyone say there, having ascended toward that which is above *nous* and looking at it?'[203]

The state of contact with the One is perhaps best described as an act of *presence*. As the preceding sections will have made clear, different aspects of the Plotinian universe are potentially present to each other; it is the contemplation and attention which act to focus a given reality from the

[199] E.g. VI.9[9]4.22–8. This process of stripping away multiplicity is described in the next chapter as 'practical aphairesis'.
[200] I.3[20]4.15–16.
[201] VI.9[9]9.60–10.2; V.5[32]7.35; VI.7[38]34.13, 36.18; V.3[49]17.29. See Hadot 1986b, 245.
[202] Cited p. 8.
[203] VI.8[39]9.34–5.

potential state of δύναμις into the actualised state of ἐνέργεια. The vision of the One comes about not through knowledge or *noêsis*, but 'according to a presence greater than knowledge' (κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα).[204]

This act of presence to the transcendent is the primary locus of Plotinian written silence. Plotinus, as we have seen, is reluctant to call the One 'the One'; it is 'the Good' only in a certain sense. He is prone to refer to it by negative names: 'something which is not *nous*', 'that which is beyond being', or more simply 'that which is beyond', or 'something other'.[205] Such an ineffable reality, left alone, would present much the same literary dynamic as the negative passages we have surveyed in the Middle Platonists. But Plotinus insists on bringing this unspeakable, indeterminate reality into the realm of the phenomenological. The presence to the One is, in fact, something which he claims for himself, as an event in his spiritual life. It is a kind of *possession,* something that the philosopher attains to and has.

The One's Own Modes of Knowing

Plotinus also sometimes attributes a kind of consciousness to the One itself:[206] while it does not think or engage in intellection, he sometimes describes it as variously possessing ἐγρήγορσις καὶ ὑπερνόησις,[207] κατανόησις,[208] and occasionally other quasi-cognitive attributes.[209] He has philosophic reasons for doing so which go beyond the scope of this book. But this quasi-consciousness of the One is a problem with great relevance for philosophic silence. As the following chapter will argue, the significance of these forms of consciousness which are not forms of consciousness lies in the Plotinian attempt to create indeterminacy surrounding the One and its relationship to beings – the One both has consciousness and does not have consciousness.

[204] VI.9[9]4.1 ff. The work of Frederic Schroeder has emphasised the importance of presence in Plotinus: see particularly Schroeder 1985 and 1987.
[205] E.g. II.9[33]13.32-3; VI.8[39]9.34-5.
[206] See Rist 1967a, 36–52; Schroeder 1987, 691.
[207] VI.8[39]16.32. Cf. ibid. 24; the One has a self-directed νεῦσις.
[208] IV.7[2]12.9. See VI.8[39]16.1-39, a highly apophatic passage which makes it clear that the affirmation of this type of 'consciousness' to the One must be taken as indeterminate. Cf. Sells 1994, 25.
[209] Cf. VI.7[38]39.1-4: self-directed ἐπιβολή; V.3[49]13.6-9; V.4[7]2.15.

CHAPTER 7

The Poetics of Transcendence in Plotinus

> Das höchste denkerische Sagen besteht darin, im Sagen das eigentlich zu Sagende nicht einfach zu ver-schweigen, sondern es so zu sagen, dass es im Nichtsagen gerade genannt wird. Das Sagen als Erschweigen.
>
> Heidegger 1997, 423.

Returning to the question of philosophic writing posed at the outset of this book, we are now in a better position to give answers as to what Plotinus is doing in the *Enneads*, given his understanding of the limits of discursivity and modes of knowing. Having examined these limits in a general way, we may examine them in practice in Plotinus' philosophy; this chapter will concentrate on close reading of several main passages, explicating various elements of written silence and transcendence along the way. It consists of three sections: the first explores Plotinus' negative methodologies; the second explores his paradoxical explorations of the positive side of language with regard to the ineffable; the third and final section discusses the overarching state of indeterminacy which Plotinus' positive and negative approaches to the highest reality create when read as a single discourse.

The picture which emerges is, on the one hand, a philosophical deployment of indeterminacy: Plotinian negative methodologies, especially in combination with qualified and paradoxical positive methodologies, can aptly be called 'indeterminations'. They do not tell us what the One is, or how the different levels of reality relate to each other; instead, they inspire us to cease to imagine that the One is something, or that the relations between the hypostases are fully explicable through discourse. They eliminate the determined bounds of thoughts, leaving in their place τὸ ἄπειρον, 'unboundedness'.

On the other hand, these methods are shot through with rhetorics and tropes of written silence, especially invocations of the mysteries and other

religious tropes. In the context of the well-established tradition of Platonist philosophic silence, the reminder that the One is ineffable should be considered in part as an example of written silence – the writing of the self-hiding secret. They also contain elements of what can only be called 'philosophic religion'; Plotinus, in a few passages, refers to a form of silent prayer directed to *nous*, and even to the One itself. The religious element in his evocations of the unsaid and unsayable cannot be reduced to metaphor or stylistic window-dressing for 'serious philosophic concerns'; in the Plotinian universe, practical contact with higher realities and the literal divinisation of the soul is the highest possible philosophic concern.

The manifestations of philosophic silence deployed by Plotinus often take the form of extended literary techniques; as his writing style typically flows along a series of problems and investigates different ways to approach them, reflecting the discussions from which the *Enneads* were in part drawn,[1] isolated citations rarely do justice to what he is doing in a literary sense. With a view to appreciating Plotinian philosophic silence in its 'natural environment', I quote *in extenso* an exemplary passage dealing with the means of approaching the first principle, to which the present chapter will refer back in several contexts and in juxtaposition to other passages from the *Enneads*. The passage is very dense, and rewards repeated scrutiny and close reading. All references to this passage throughout the present chapter will simply be to line numbers.

The passage is Section 6 from Treatise 32, *That the* Noêta *are not Outside of* Nous*, and on the Good.* In the lead-up to our passage, Plotinus has been discussing the presence and absence of the One vis à vis the realm of being, calling being itself a trace (ἴχνος) of the One, and etymologising the verb 'to be' (εἶναι) and its cognates as derived from the word 'one' (ἕν).[2] He then departs on a passage of intense unsaying:

> But let these [etymologies] be as they may. Since the being (οὐσίας) which arises is Form – for one would not call it anything else which arises from [that source; *sc*. the One] – and not a Form of something, but of everything, so as not to leave anything outside it, then that [*sc*. the One] must necessarily be formless. But if it is formless, it is not being; for being must be something, and this something must be definite, but [the One] cannot be taken as such. For then it would not be a principle, but only that which you have said it is. So if all things are within coming-to-be (τῷ γενομένῳ), which of them will you say it is? Since it is none of these things, one would

[1] See n. 1.
[2] V.5[32]5.12 *ad fin*.

say it is beyond them. These are beings, and being itself; thus, it is beyond being (ἐπέκεινα ἄρα ὄντος). But this phrase 'beyond being' does not determine it (οὐ τόδε λέγει), for it is not a statement. It does not say a name for it, but states only that it is 'not that'. But in so doing, it does not comprehend the One at all; for it would be absurd to seek to comprehend that boundless nature. Anyone wishing to do so has utterly left off following its trace (ἴχνος), even for a short distance. But, just as one wishing to see the noetic nature who has nothing of sensory perception will see that which is beyond the sensory, so he who wishes to see that which is beyond the noetic will only see when he has let go of all that which is noetic. He learns that it is [i.e., that the One 'exists'] through this [*sc. nous*], but he learns in what way it is by letting this go. But this 'in what way' should be taken as signifying 'not in what way' (τὸ δὲ οἷον σημαίνοι ἂν τὸ οὐχ οἷον); for there is no 'in what way' where there is no 'what'. But we, in our birth-pangs, are at a loss for what to say, and we speak about the ineffable (περὶ οὐ ῥητοῦ), and we name it, wishing to signify it to ourselves as well as we can. And perhaps even the name 'one' is a denial of multiplicity. This is why the Pythagoreans signified esoterically (συμβολικῶς πρὸς ἀλλήλους) that 'Apollo' was a denial of multiplicity.[3] But if 'the One', both the name and the [reality] that the name clarifies (τό τε ὄνομα τό τε δηλούμενον), is [taken as] a positive proposition, then it would be less clear than if no name had been applied to it. Perhaps it was so applied so that that seeker, beginning from this point, which signifies total simplicity, would finally negate this as well. It was posited as well and fairly as possible by the one who posited it, but it is not worthy even as a means of clarifying that nature, which cannot be heard, nor understood by one who hears, but, if at all, by one who sees. But if the one who sees seeks to look upon a form, he will not know this.[4]

Negative Methods in Plotinus

Dean Inge, in his study of Plotinus, speculated that if Plotinus had known of a mathematical concept for 'zero' he might have termed the One 'nothing'.[5] In fact, he does so, calling it οὐδὲ ἕν, 'no thing',[6] and, as we have just read in Treatise 32 (l. 9), οὐδὲν τουτῶν, 'none of these [existing] things'.[7] The previous chapter discussed Plotinus' rule that predicates

[3] See p. 61.
[4] V.5[32]6.
[5] Inge 1923, 107–108.
[6] V.2[11]1.1.
[7] At VI.9[9]5.31 Plotinus says of the One ᾧ ὄνομα μὲν κατὰ ἀλήθειαν οὐδὲν προσῆκον, εἴπερ δὲ δεῖ ὀνομάσαι, κοινῶς ἂν λεχθὲν προσηκόντως ἕν, a phrase which Armstrong is probably right to translate as that 'which in truth has no fitting name, but if we must give it a name, "one" would be an appropriate ordinary way of speaking of it'. This passage could, however, be translated as 'that to which the name "nothing" is truly fitting, but if we must etc.'

cannot be applied to the One, as well as the fact that Plotinus often breaks this rule, trespassing into the territory which he himself places beyond discourse. The present section discusses one way in which Plotinus indicates that this may be permissible: through negations, such as calling it 'nothing'.

The negative method in Plotinus has been analysed particularly well in a series of articles by Wolfson.[8] He points out, firstly, that the Aristotelean theoretical distinction between negation and privation (discussed on page 154) applies in Plotinus, and so Plotinus' negative descriptions of the One should not be seen as predicates,[9] an approach we have seen in Chapter 5 formulated by Alcinoüs.

Wolfson makes further observations which may be applied with profit to our passage from Treatise 32. He notes that Plotinus' negative method should not be associated solely with grammatically negative statements; not all Plotinian negations need contain the word 'not'. Positive predicates can be used with a negative meaning – e.g. Plotinus' use of the term 'one' as a denial of multiplicity, rather than as an affirmation of any kind (ll. 26–7). Negation can also of course be expressed by affirmative propositions using adjectives with a built-in negative meaning – e.g. the alpha-privative adjectives, such as ἀνείδεον, 'formless'.[10] Elative statements may also be negations. 'Beyond being', as Plotinus understands it, is a negation, denying to the One any share in the ontic realm, but not therefore determining it in another way: 'This phrase "beyond being" does not determine it, for it is not a statement. It does not say a name for it, but states only that it is "not that"' (ll. 11–13). The 'hyper-' adjectives also function in this way elsewhere in Plotinus: to say that the One is ὑπέρκαλον certainly does not mean that it is 'extremely beautiful', but rather, 'beyond beauty'.[11] Often, as well, a Plotinian comparison which seems positive in sense turns out to have a negative force; e.g., the One is like the sun, but only in that it is not seen by means of another entity, but by its own 'light', which is not light at all.[12]

[8] Wolfson 1952 and 1957.

[9] Plotinus seems to show specific knowledge of this distinction at VI.3[44]19; VI.7[38]36. See Mortley 1975, 373–374.

[10] Plotinus elsewhere employs a range of alpha-privative adjectives to describe the One, such as ἄμορφον and ἀνείδεον (VI.7[38]17.40), ἀμέριστος (VI.9[9]5.38–41), ἀνενδεής (VI.9[9]6.24–6) and many others.

[11] VI.7[38]33.19-20. Cf. I.8[51]2. These observations are expanded from Wolfson 1957, 146. On Plotinus' use of superlatives and 'hyper-' adjectives to describe the One, see Rist 1964b, 69–70.

[12] V.3[49]17.38, cited p. 219. Cf. e.g. VI.7[38]35.8–20; III.8[51]10.4–5. This dynamic of 'negative comparison' noted by Schroeder 1996, 337.

Plotinus makes self-reflexive statements as to the effectiveness of negative determinations of the One beyond being, and concludes that they remain at the level of *dianoia*; that is, that may tell us something about the One – namely, what it is not – but they cannot express the One itself.[13] This distinction should be understood in the light of the identity theory of truth; non-discursive truths, by way of contrast with negative statements about the One, are predicates in the truest possible sense.

Apophasis

This book began with some discussion of apophatic language – the use of multiple negations or contradictions resulting in non-predication. I mentioned that my definition of this term is more broad than some found in scholarly literature; in the post-Plotinian Platonists, as well as in the Christian theological tradition, the apophatic method takes on a formalism which it does not have in Plotinus.[14]

Apophasis, as I understand it, does not necessarily involve negations in the sense of negative statements, but it will always involve negations in the Aristotelean sense outlined in Chapter 5; its defining feature as a method is that it uses multiple statements which, taken individually might even be conventional predicates, but when taken together create a situation of non-predication. Thus, statements such as 'the One is neither this nor that', or 'the One is neither moved nor at rest'[15] are examples of the basic 'apophatic unit'; they posit something, then contradict it, creating a situation of indeterminacy rather than of predication.[16] Passages such as our exemplary quotation from Treatise 32, however, are an extended, and more subtle, criss-crossing kind of apophasis, applying self-negation to the act of speech itself.

Analysing a section of the passage, its propositions can be set out as follows:

1. The phrase 'beyond being' does not determine the One since it is not a statement. It does not name the One (ll. 11–13).

[13] See e.g. Rist 1964b, 87 n. 129; Hadot 1986b, 247 and citations at p. 6.
[14] See p. 25 above. On apophasis in Plotinus, see Wolfson 1952, 1957; Armstrong 1967, 14–28; Mortley 1975; Sells 1994, 14–33.
[15] VI.9[9]3.47; *ibid.* 42–44. Cf. VI.9[9]6.48–9; V.6[24]6.31 ff.
[16] See p. 25.

2. Thus, it does not comprehend the One, which cannot be comprehended (ll. 13–15).
3. Anyone seeking to comprehend the One has strayed from the path which leads to the One – has 'lost its traces' (ll. 15–17).
4. Someone seeking to see the One must eliminate the noetic (ll. 17–21).
5. He learns from *nous* that the One exists, but he learns 'in what way' it exists by letting go of *nous*; i.e., from the One itself (ll. 21–22).
6. This phrase 'in what way', however, should be understood as meaning 'not in what way' (τὸ δὲ οἷον σημαίνοι ἂν τὸ οὐχ οἷον), since the One is not a 'what', i.e., is no thing (ll. 22–23).
7. The philosophic discourse has fallen into *aporia*, since it is attempting to discuss the ineffable, and has resorted to naming the One in order to signify it to ourselves as well as possible (ll. 24–26).
8. Perhaps the name 'one' itself is merely a denial of multiplicity, which may be useful as a basic starting point for a philosophic seeker, but the seeker will eventually have to negate this name as well, since it cannot even clarify the nature it seeks to describe (ll. 29–35).

Proposition 1 denies that 'beyond being' applies a name to the One; proposition 7, however, states that the discourse has named the One as well as possible, thus contradicting proposition 1. We are left with a mode of writing that is neither a naming nor not a naming. Proposition 5 indicates that the seeker learns 'in what way' the One is, not from *nous*, but from the One itself; proposition 6 negates proposition 5 (τὸ δὲ οἷον σημαίνοι ἂν τὸ οὐχ οἷον). The nature of the knowledge acquired beyond *nous* is thus left indeterminate; we know only that it is not the knowledge attained through *nous* itself. The proffered explanation, that it is knowledge of the οἷον of the One – its state or type of being, its 'how' as opposed to its 'what' – is no sooner given than it is taken away. Proposition 7 states that the discussion has attempted to clarify the One as much as possible – to 'signify' it; proposition 8 denies that the name 'one', *even as a denial of multiplicity*, can clarify the One's nature. Here Plotinus casts doubt even on the propriety of negative attributes, and even when applied as a mode of clarification insofar as possible. He also indicates that even the attempt at clarification is counter-productive: '… It would be absurd to seek to comprehend that boundless nature. Anyone wishing to do so has utterly left off following its trace (ἴχνος), even for a short distance' (ll. 14–17).

This passage presents itself as an attempt to give the best account possible of the One, given the limitations of language and discursive thought,

but it denies its own ability to do this. Then again, if it is read as strictly applying the logic of negative language, i.e. non-predicative statements, it indicates that these, too, are names (predicates), and thus forbidden. The overall technique here may be profitably regarded as subtle and refined form of apophatic discourse, in which Plotinus is unsaying not only the One itself, but also the very linguistic strategies which he deploys in order to give some account of the One.

My analysis of Plotinus' discourse about the One is thus in a way more pessimistic than that of certain scholars, whose accounts of Plotinus' negative techniques take Plotinus' repeated statements that he wishes to give the best possible account of the One at face value.[17] Close reading of Treatise 32, 6 shows that Plotinus unsays his own saying in this regard; that he denies that he is giving such an account, even as he gives it. We may, however, question whether Plotinus really intends anything as straightforward as giving an account of the One.

The logical contradictions in the apophatic passage cited should be clear. It is instructive to consider the parallels between the contradictions inherent in giving an account which denies the possibility of that giving and other tropes of hiding and revealing which we have seen in Platonist discourse, such as the trope of the 'secret revealed', and the appeal to mystic silence. In all these types of statement there is an unresolvable contradiction if the text is read looking for logical coherence. But, as many examples cited in the course of this work have shown, acts of written silence are not intended as logically coherent statements; they are rhetorical statements of an absence. Structurally, then, Plotinian apophatic discourse can profitably be read as a trope of philosophic silence more generally, in that it generates a kind of 'secret knowledge', the nature of the One.

Discursive Aphairesis

A second negative methodology, used throughout the *Enneads*, is the practice known as aphairesis, 'removal'.[18] It consists in eliminating misconceptions about higher realities through 'a process of mental abstraction'.[19] In Treatise 33 Plotinus berates the Gnostics for despising the earthly existence, unaware as they are of the soul's true excellence: 'They ought

[17] E.g. Heiser 1991, 61; Bussanich 1996, 45. Wolfson 1952 and 1957 rightly anatomises the Aristotelean theory behind Plotinus' use of negations, but fails to notice the passages where Plotinus denies the adequacy of this methodology.

[18] See generally Whittaker 1969a; Hadot 1981, 188; Mortley 1986, II, 45–62; Carabine 1995, 132–5.

[19] Whittaker 1969b, 123.

to have removed it [i.e. the bodily nature] in their thought (περιέλοντας τῇ διανοίᾳ) and seen what remained, a noetic sphere encompassing the Form of the cosmos.'[20] Here, as often, aphairesis is a process of discursive clarification, which may take the form of extended passages of removal of concepts, or of ambitious thought-experiments.[21]

In Treatise 38 Plotinus makes a self-reflexive reference to this method, contrasting it to the practical achievement of contact with the One:

> For the knowledge (γνῶσις) or touching of the One is the greatest thing, and he [*sc*. Plato in *R*. 505a2] says that this is 'the greatest study' (μάθημα), not calling the looking at it a 'study', but meaning that we learn something about it beforehand. Comparisons and abstractions and knowledge (ἀναλογίαι τε καὶ ἀφαιρέσεις τε καὶ γνώσεις) of the things that come from it teach us and are like steps upon the way to it (ἀναβασμοί τινες), but purifications and virtues and adornments convey us toward it itself, [as do] progress through the noetic world and establishment there and feasting on the things there.[22]

Aphairetic and other discursive methods are clearly contrasted with their practical counterparts in the practice of philosophy as a way of life, and it is these latter which bring the aspirant to his goal; logical methods merely 'teach us something beforehand'.[23] We may adduce the references in Treatise 32 to the knowledge of the One which *nous* gives as contrasted with the knowledge-that-is-not-knowledge of the One which is acquired by removing the noetic from the soul, and the vision of the One which is gained by putting aside 'hearing' – that is, language and discourse (ll. 35–6).

Practical Aphairesis

Aphairesis is also understood by Plotinus in quite a different sense, precisely as this spiritual practice of freeing the soul from *dianoia*, and then even of *noêsis*,[24] in the movement toward the One. In this sense of the term, in which context he usually employs the verbal form ἀφαιρέω,

[20] II.9[33]17.4-6.

[21] Other examples include IV.7[2]10.30; VI.9[9]4.7–10, 4.33, 6.51–2, 7.17, 18–20, 9.50–52, 11.8–11; III.8[30]9.32, 10.31; V.8[31]11.4, 11.11; V.5[32]7.31–32, 13; VI.7[38]34, 35, 36; VI.8[39]19; V.3[49]9, 17.30 *ad fin*.

[22] VI.7[38]36.3–10.

[23] Cf. Hadot 1986b, 247. The attentive reader will have noticed a completely improper use of the term *gnôsis* in this passage, referring to knowing the One, followed by *gnôsis* in its normal Plotinian sense (see p. 187). Plotinus' use of cognitive terminology in this 'improper' way is discussed below.

[24] VI.7[38]34.3.

Plotinus means something very different from the epistemological method described above, propounding instead a method which should be described as both ontological and epistemological – indeed, the very method which is contrasted, in the passage cited just above, with conceptual aphairesis.[25]

The classic description of this method occurs in Treatise 49, *Modes of Knowledge and the Transcendental.*[26] Passing beyond discursive descriptions, and even *nous* itself, in approaching the One, the soul suddenly 'takes light' (φῶς λάβῃ),[27] and

> being enlightened, it has what it sought, and this is the true goal of the soul, to touch that light and to see it through itself, not through another light, but it itself, by which it also sees. For that by which it is enlightened is that which it must see; for neither is the sun [seen] by the light of another. So how does this happen? Take away everything (ἄφελε πάντα)! [28]

Here we have aphairesis as removal from the soul of everything that is not the One: compare Treatise 32, where 'he who wishes to see that which is beyond the noetic will only see when he has let go of all that which is noetic' (ll. 19–21). When we recall that, at the level of *nous*, cognitive events are ontological realities, we see how this method cannot be described simply as a process of clearing away ideas about the One, unless 'ideas' are understood in a strongly realist sense, as non-temporal states of being. It is an ontological transformation of the soul into a simple form, whereby it is able to see, touch, or otherwise contact the One because of the simplicity to which it has attained.[29]

True simplicity for Plotinus is ineffable; for the soul to enter such a state means it will have ceased to be anything which can be truly put into words. Plotinus uses a number of strategies to indicate this self-yet-not-self state of being. I have translated the final lines of our passage from Treatise 32

[25] Cf. Hadot 1981, 188: 'un méthode … en quelque sorte transintellectuel'; Mazur 2010, 36: Aphairesis '… seems to involve both a cognitive aspect … and a corresponding ontological aspect – the dismissal from one's own self (the locus of mystical subjectivity) of any thought, any knowledge, and indeed any mental activity whatsoever.'

[26] Armstrong translates the title Περὶ τῶν γνωριστικῶν ὑποστασέων καὶ τοῦ ἐπέκεινα as *On the Knowing Hypostases and that which is Beyond*; I have preferred the translation of Oosthout 1991, as it emphasises the phenomenological approach which characterises this treatise, approaching the hypostases rather as modes of knowing than as 'levels of being'. The Plotinian hypostasis is always both of these things, and Plotinus' approach depends on which function of hypostasis he is concerned with in a given context.

[27] V.3[49]17.21–28.

[28] V.3[49]17.34–8.

[29] Cf. VI.9[9]8.32–6: the One is fully present to anything which contains nothing of otherness. Cf. Mazur 2010, 47–50.

as 'But if the one who sees seeks to look upon a Form, he will not know this' (ἀλλ᾽ εἰ τὸ ὁρῶν εἶδος ζητεῖ βλέπειν, οὐδὲ τοῦτο εἴσεται).[30] My translation has tried to capture the indeterminacy of the Greek. What is the 'this' which the seer will not know? It is unclear whether it is a Form (i.e., 'if the seer tries to look at a form, he will not know even that', as Armstrong) or the One itself (i.e., in seeking to see a something with Form, the soul will miss the formless One). The ambiguity serves to indicate the lack of differentiation at this level of reality, where total simplicity has stripped away everything, so there is nothing for an analytic account to describe.

This process, which I call 'practical aphairesis' in distinction to the conceptual aphairesis described above, does not inhabit the text in the same way that discursive formulations do. It is a methodology that the *Enneads* recommend, but we do not find the practice itself in the *Enneads*, only narrative descriptions thereof. We have seen a similar extra-textual referencing in certain Middle Platonist examples of the *via eminentiæ* (see page 159), but Plotinus' approach differs from his predecessors' in two main ways. Firstly, it orients the narrative descriptions more forcefully beyond the text. Since Plotinus makes it clear that this process of stripping away, in its higher levels, takes place in *nous*, and even involves the final shedding of *noêsis* itself, it is thus far beyond any accurate discursive description; indeed, it cannot be said to be a process except from the time-bound perspective of the embodied soul. The educational function of discursive aphairesis is often described in terms of the first steps of this journey, as in Treatise 38, cited page 218, or Treatise 32, where the seeker uses the name 'the One' as a starting point, which he then negates in pursuit of the reality itself (ll. 31 *ad fin.*). Plotinus' written passages of abstraction may be seen as a basic or propaedeutic phase of the practical method, but its later stages leave the text behind. A second difference between Plotinus' descriptions of practical aphairesis and earlier examples of *via eminentiæ* is the emphasis which he places on the act of radical simplification or 'stripping away' of attributes. He essentially makes a negative method out of what had been, in Plato and Middle Platonism, primarily an elative method.[31]

[30] Ll. 36–7.

[31] Mortley 1975, 373 follows Whittaker 1969b, 123 ff. in denying that Plotinian aphairesis is a negative method. Two problems with this analysis are 1) that both authors fail to distinguish between discursive and practical aphairesis and thus miss the radical distinction which Plotinus draws between the two, and 2) that discursive aphairesis certainly makes no positive statements about the One, and its overall aim is to remove concepts, a negative procedure, while practical aphairesis is not a discursive

Plotinus often refers to this process of removal in terms drawing on the mysteries: it is a *katharsis*,[32] it is like the ritual stripping off of clothing before initiation[33] and it leads to one becoming a *theatês*, with the place of the cultic *theama*[34] taken by *nous*[35] or by the One itself.[36] Plotinus is by no means original in equating the higher reaches of Platonist achievement with initiation, as Chapter 3 has shown. But the sacralisation of this process in much of his writing is striking.

Both the invocation of the mysteries and the evocation of an extra-textual, ineffable encounter with the One are acts of hiding and revealing. Plotinus is in fact putting himself in the position of the initiate, and his references to this act of seeing partakes of the same dynamics of exclusion as the invocation of initiated silence by the initiand. Treatise 1, *On Beauty*, presents a good representative example of this blending of religious and philosophic concerns. Having evoked a παλαιὸς λόγος which states that the virtues are purifications, he cites as confirmation the esoteric message of the mystery rituals (αἱ τελεταὶ ὀρθῶς αἰνίττονται), which state that the unpurified man will lie in the muck upon his arrival in Hades.[37] Having thus set the tone, Plotinus enters into a discourse blending concerns of an ontologised aesthetics in which beauty is reality (ll. 21–22) and in which the One itself is called 'beauty' (τὴν καλλονήν, l. 26). Plotinus then shifts to a phenomenological register:

> So our task is to ascend again to the good, toward which every soul is reaching. And anyone who has seen it knows what I mean by 'beautiful'.[38]

The phrase 'anyone who has seen it knows what I mean' seems to echo a stock phrase used to evoke the secret of the mysteries in

methodology at all, so cannot be said to be negative or positive. However, Plotinus' *descriptions* of practical aphairesis share the same negative methodologies as his discursive aphairetic passages, as the examples cited above show: the vision of the One is *not* attained through discursive thought or *nous*.

32 E.g. I.2[19]4.1 ff. Indeed, the *katharsis* referred to in the citation from Treatise 38 above as a practical technique contrasted with logical methods may include this conception of aphairesis in its sphere of meanings.

33 I.6[1]7.5-8.

34 On the terms θεατής and θέαμα, see p. 49.

35 E.g. IV.3[27]1.12.

36 VI.7[38]36.11; VI.9.10.20, 11.20. See Pépin 1984, 30, n. 56, who gives parallels from Iamblichus, Proclus and the Pseudo-Dionysius.

37 I.6[1]6.1-5.

38 *Ibid*. 7.1-3. Cf. VI.9[9]4.17-20: 'And if someone has not come to the θέαμα, then his soul would have no understanding of the glory there . . .'

potentially uninitiated company.[39] Plotinus is not revealing the nature of the encounter with the One, but rather employing the mystery trope of philosophic silence, fully embedded within the 'double bind of secrecy':[40] he holds out the beauty of the vision of the One to the reader, but the reader is excluded from it, unless, that is, he has already experienced it, in which case he has no need of Plotinus' description.

'Speaking Improperly': Kataphatic Descriptions of the One

For all that Plotinus insists, repeatedly, that only negations may be posited of the One, he is also willing to make statements about the One which are clearly predicative. This he does with the overarching reservation: 'But if it is necessary to bring in these appellations for that which we are seeking, let it again be said that this is not speaking properly (οὐκ ὀρθῶς εἴρηται).'[41]

Modes of 'Improper' Speech in Plotinus

It is often conjectured that Plotinus' kataphatic statements about the One, which are relatively common in the earlier treatises, gave way to a more thoroughgoing application of negativity in Plotinus' later work. But the late Treatise 39, *On the Volition and Will of the One*, is a *tour de force* of kataphatic descriptions of the One;[42] we must conclude that seemingly positive descriptions of the One played a role in Plotinus' methodology of exposition even in his later work.[43]

The treatise begins with an initial essay on the problem of free will, and Plotinus then introduces a long treatment of the One.[44] An apophatic passage follows, describing the One as the source of all good things and also as not their source (quoted page 5 at the outset of the present work). This passage falls within a methodological excursus which severely attacks the ability of discourse to express the One. Our speech about the One takes

[39] See Athanassiadi 2006, 37, n. 17. Cf. Paus. I 37, 4.
[40] See p. 30.
[41] VI.8[39]13.1–3.
[42] See Heiser 1991, 62 ff.; Bussanich 1988, 21 ff.
[43] Cf. Bussanich 1988, 21. Carabine 1995, Introduction and 111–116, gives an excellent appreciation of the interrelationship of Plotinus' kataphatic and apophatic techniques.
[44] Beginning from VI.8[39]8 and continuing until 13.

place through the application of lesser concepts drawing on lesser beings, and

> due to the impossibility of saying what is appropriate to it, we say these things. Nevertheless, not only can we find nothing to say in accordance with it (κατ' αὐτοῦ), but neither [can we even say] anything about (περὶ αὐτοῦ) it, properly speaking.[45]

Plotinus then makes one of his strongest statements of ineffability, combining apophasis and aphairesis:

> It is necessary to say that it is in relation to absolutely nothing (δεῖ δὲ ὅλως πρὸς οὐδὲν αὐτὸν λέγειν). For it is what it is before them; then we take away even the 'it is' (ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ ἔστιν ἀφαιροῦμεν), so as to [remove] all relations whatever with beings.[46]

An aphairetic passage follows, where Plotinus removes various concepts from the field of terminology appropriate to the One. We cannot say 'as it is by nature' (ὡς πέφυκεν), since φύσις is a temporal concept, nor 'it is not from itself' (οὐ παρ' αὐτῆς εἶναι), since we have already taken away the verb 'to be', nor that 'it came about' (συνέβη), which implies an action separate from the essence of the thing which came about, and thus multiplicity.[47] This passage is especially striking, in that it occurs in the most kataphatic of the later writings; these statements devoted to denying the possibility of saying anything about the One – 'neither [can we even say] anything about (περὶ αὐτοῦ) it, properly speaking' – are presented in a context full of rich characterisations of the One, often marked by a theological tone.[48]

The reader of Treatise 39 is struck by the widespread use of the equivocating adverbial *hoion*, used to indicate that Plotinus is making statements which approximate, or give a notion of the nature of what he is attempting to discuss.[49] Heiser has noted that the adverbial *hoion* normally serves to signal an analogy of some kind, and that this is strictly impossible in the case of the One, which is incommensurate with any *comparandum*;[50] nevertheless, Plotinus does sometimes use it in this analogical sense,

[45] VI.8[39]8.2–6.
[46] *Ibid.* 12–15.
[47] *Ibid. ad fin.*
[48] Cf. Armstrong 2003, VI, 223.
[49] Οἷον appears more than seventy times in the treatise, well above the average, even taking into account the great length of the work; it occurs approximately the same number of times in Treatise 38, the previous work chronologically, perhaps indicating that Plotinus was experimenting with pushing the limits of equivocal language with regard to the One at this period of his working life.
[50] Heiser 1991, 63.

though always in a qualified way.[51] Heiser's observation, however, is correct, if we take Plotinus' use of *hoion* with predicates as a way of speaking 'improperly'; any such analogy can be only a 'quasi-analogy'.

These constructions serve to indicate precisely *that* Plotinus is speaking improperly. The instances of *hoion* in Treatise 39 are especially rigorous in this regard, and avoid even 'quasi-analogy', serving rather to 'undetermine' the object of discussion. The One has 'quasi-hypostasis', which is its 'quasi-action', quasi-attributes which Plotinus immediately qualifies with a series of denials that leave the reader wondering how these quasi-attributes could be said to mean anything at all.[52] As Plotinus says in the midst of a particularly intensive deployment of *hoion*, 'It is necessary to go along with the names if we are to say anything about it, using them perforce for the sake of elucidation, although we do not allow them speaking accurately; let the *hoion* be understood in every case.'[53] Even when he does not write *hoion*, he means *hoion*.

As Heiser argues, Plotinus uses *hoion* to indicate that he is not applying predicates, but 'quasi-acts', to the One.[54] By 'quasi-acts', however, we must understand that what Plotinus is doing is steering the reader's understanding in a certain direction, while simultaneously refusing to determine the nature of the goal. 'Elative indeterminism' is perhaps the best way of describing Plotinus' method here. In the last chapter we discussed a mode of cognition which can only be called a mode of cognition because of its position at the summit of a chain of lower modes – a mode of direct unknowing, which, in Treatise 39, Plotinus attributes to the One itself under the name of *hypernoêsis*.[55] All the quasi-acts and attributes which Plotinus applies to the One in Treatise 39 may be understood as occupying the supreme position in other chains of reality, a supreme, yet transcending, position which he occasionally indicates through the use of constructions with *hyper-* (ὑπέρκαλος, ὑπεράγαθος, ὑπερόντως),[56] but

[51] E.g. III.8[51]10.4-5, an example of the 'negative comparison' described p. 214.

[52] VI.8[39]7.47: ἡ οἷον ὑπόστασις αὐτοῦ ἡ οἷον ἐνέργεια, negated *ad fin.*

[53] VI.8[39]13.47-50.

[54] Heiser 1991, 65–6, following the terminological usage of Deck 1967. It has been argued that οἷον has a specific technical force, and is not in fact equivocal in Plotinus (Anton 1977, 266–267), but this argument has not met with any success; both the uses of οἷον in the context of the One, and Plotinus' approach to predication more generally make it difficult to maintain. Anton objects to the use of 'quasi' when translating Plotinian attributes of the One, arguing essentially that these attributes are elative; i.e., he would substitute 'hyper-' for 'quasi-'. The point, though useful, may be argued over-strenuously.

[55] VI.8[39]16.32.

[56] VI.9[9]6.40; VI.8[39]14.42; I.8[51]2.8.

more often indicates through alternating predications and negations, or the use of *hoion*.[57]

Verbs of Incomplete Communication

Plotinus uses a number of verbs when speaking of the One which I will term 'verbs of incomplete communication'. The One cannot be said (λέγειν), but it may be 'intimated' (σημαίνειν) or 'clarified' (δηλοῦν). We have seen both of these in Treatise 32 (ll. 23, 25, 35; cf. 32, σημαντικόν), where I have translated σημαίνειν as 'signify' and δηλοῦν as 'clarify'. We may compare a passage from Treatise 49:

> Therefore it is truly ineffable (ἄρρητον τῇ ἀληθείᾳ). For whatever you say, you say something. But 'beyond all things and beyond the most august *nous*' is the only true [statement] of all the things we can say about it, there being no name for it. But [we should instead say] that it is neither one of the totality of things that exist, nor is it its name – that we can say nothing of it. But insofar as it is possible for us, we try to indicate something about it (σημαίνειν ἐπιχειροῦμεν περὶ αὐτοῦ).[58]

Plotinus often uses these verbs to indicate the kind of necessarily incomplete account of the One which he wishes to give: barred from speaking its nature, we can say something about it.[59] The One cannot be named, but if we must name it for purposes of discussion, 'the One' is a good name to choose.[60]

But passages like those cited above from Treatises 32 (ll. 29–36) and 49, considered from a strictly logical perspective, deny that this is a worthy or effective procedure. Plotinus' account of his own account of the One makes it indefinite in scope, hovering between giving some account and giving none whatever. In a passage from Treatise 49 which has given rise to some controversy, Plotinus differentiates between 'saying' (λέγειν) the

[57] This interpretation is in line with Armstrong 1990b, 32, who suggests that the kataphatic sections of Treatise 39 should be read in tandem with the intensive apophatic writing of the previous Treatise 38. We can thus, '… see its strongly positive affirmation about the One … as part of the exercise of the most radical negative theology, that of the *negatio negationis*.'

[58] V.3[49]13.1–6. Armstrong translates οὐκ ὄνομα ὂν αὐτοῦ as 'it is not its name'; Oosthout translates 'there is no name for it'. Both readings are possible, as ὄν could modify ὄνομα or τὸ ἕν, the main subject of the sentence. On this passage see Schroeder 1985, 75–77, 1996, 344; Oosthout 1991, 158–159; Bussanich 1996, 41.

[59] E.g. VI.8[39]18.52–53: the One is unsayable, we say it as best we can. Cf. II.9[33]1.5–8: 'When we call it "one" or "good", it is necessary to suppose [it right] to say its nature is also one, not predicating anything of it, but clarifying (δηλοῦντας) it to ourselves as much as possible.' VI.9[9]3.49–51; V.1[10]10.1 ff.; V.5[32]6.23–6; VI.7[38]38.4–9.

[60] VI.9[9]5.31–2.

One, which is impossible, and 'speaking about' (λέγειν περί) the One, which is possible but inadequate.[61]

> So how are we to speak about it (Πῶς οὖν λέγομεν περὶ αὐτοῦ)? We say something about it, but we do not at all say it in itself, nor do we have *gnôsis* or *noêsis* of it. So how do we speak about it, if we do not have it? Or does not having it in *gnôsis* mean not having it at all? No, we have it in such a way as to speak about it, but not to speak it in itself (περὶ αὐτο μὲν λέγειν, αὐτὸ δὲ μὴ λέγειν). For we say what it is not; what it is, we do not say.[62]

Here Plotinus again offers a partially effective means of apprehending the One with words, namely the standard negative method of non-predicative description, described as 'speaking about' rather than directly speaking. The controversy about this passage has centred on the difference between between λέγειν and λέγειν περὶ, only the latter being possible with regard to the One.[63] Schroeder rightly argues that λέγειν will always be equivalent to λέγειν περί in the context of the One; we may 'discuss' the One, but never 'disclose' it. He goes on to postulate a third mode of speaking of the One, 'declaring' it, based on V.3[49]14.8–20.[64] I agree, however, with the critique of Heiser,[65] that no such way of speaking is apparent in the text. But if we return to Treatise 39, cited on page 223, we see that Plotinus denies the possibility even of 'speaking about' the One. I feel that the resolution to this controversy lies in recognising that Plotinus' account of speaking of the One can only be read as indeterminate. The philosopher cannot speak the One itself; this much is uncontroversial. But, in terms of speaking *about* the One, the philosopher both can and cannot do so.

Incomplete Communication as Esotericism

It is interesting to note the ways in which the indirect modes of communication posited by Plotinus overlap with his esoteric reading of the philosophical tradition. We return to Treatise 39, where Plotinus brings Plato into the discussion of the One:

> This is why Plato speaks of 'necessary' and 'opportune', wishing to indicate as it were (ὁ Πλάτων ὡς οἷόν τε ἦν σημῆναι ἐφιέμενος) that it is far

[61] V.3[49]13.
[62] *Ibid.* 14.1–8.
[63] Schroeder 1985, 75–6; cf. Hoffmann 1997, 344.
[64] Schroeder 1985, 76–80.
[65] Heiser 1991, 59, n. 2.

> from being the product of chance, but that it is necessary that it be as it is.[66]

Plato's 'indication' is justified on the grounds that 'this is the way one must say this, being unable to speak as one would wish'.[67] I suspect that σημῆναι is to be read here as more or less equivalent to αἰνίξασθαι; we cannot attribute Plato's lack of accuracy in speaking solely to the ineffability of the subject in question, without taking into account a suggestion of secrecy.

In short, Plato is read here as exercising Late Platonist philosophic silence. Just as with the true meaning of the secrecy of the mysteries being the fact of the One's ineffability (see page 8), Plotinus' reading of Plato here is characterised by an interplay between the concepts of secrecy and of unsayability. This reading is strengthened by a reference in the following section to a doctrine of 'the ancients':

> And we should perhaps also understand what was said esoterically by the ancients (τοῖς παλαιοῖς λεγόμενον δι' αἰνίξεως) [sc. the 'beyond being' of Pl. *R.* VI 509b9] as a reference to the fact that it is not only gives rise to being, but that it is not enslaved to being or to anything else . . .[68]

We encountered this passage in Chapter 4 as an example of the assimilation of particular Platonic doctrines to a larger tradition, and of the extension of esoteric reading to Plato's dialectical writing. Here we note the way in which this passage also elides the esoteric and the ineffable.

At V.8[31]7-8, an extended reading of Plato's myth of the Demiurge in the *Timæus*, Plato 'wishes to signify' (σημῆναι θέλων, 8.7-8) a true, Plotinian meaning beneath the apparent meaning of the myth; again, the verb here seems to indicate an esoteric discourse.[69] We might adduce our passage from Treatise 32:

> But we, in our birth-pangs, are at a loss for what to say, and we speak about the ineffable (περὶ οὗ ῥητοῦ), and we name it, wishing to signify it to ourselves as well as we can. And perhaps even the name 'one'

[66] VI.8[39]18.43–46. The reference to δέον and καιρόν is to Pl. *Plt.* 284d–e, taken radically out of context.

[67] *Ibid.* ll. 52–53.

[68] *Ibid.* 19.12-19.

[69] Cf. Armstrong 2003, V, 262 n. 2: 'There is nothing in Plato to suggest the interpretation given by Plotinus here.'

> is a denial of multiplicity. This is why the Pythagoreans signified esoterically (συμβολικῶς πρὸς ἀλλήλους) that 'Apollo' was a denial of multiplicity.[70]

Note the way in which an esoteric mode of expression is called upon to indicate a doctrine of ineffability in the tradition. We have seen the way in which esoteric interpretation allows Platonist perennialists to find the doctrines they seek in predecessors who probably entertained no such ideas. But Plotinus' use of verbs of incomplete communication does more than this. In this passage, and the previous citation discussing Plato and 'the ancients', themes of ineffability, often signposted by the verb σημαίνω, and the idea of esotericism, embodied as enigma and *symbolon*, interfere and cannot be precisely separated. Once again, secrecy and silence are interconnected.

Indeterminacy and the Open Secret

The One or Good is the primary locus for written silence in the *Enneads*, but, because of the phenomenological nature of Plotinus' approach to higher realities – the fact that they are depicted as places the philosopher may visit, or inner states to which he may attain – the discourse of ineffability has an extended application. As discussed in Chapter 2, the philosopher's inner achievements may include an actual life in the noetic world and an ineffable union with the first principle. The ineffable is thus not confined to the purely ontological realm of metaphysical descriptions, or quasi-descriptions, of the One as a level of reality, but extends to the epistemological and ontological realm of practical philosophic transformation, the philosopher's ascent (ἀναγωγή) through higher realms of being and knowing.

As argued in the previous chapter, Plotinus' discourse of ineffability is not confined to the highest level of his ontological scheme; *noêsis*, too, can only be described through temporal or spatial metaphors which fail to capture its essence as a whole. The fragmented partial accounts that are possible of *nous* and *noêsis* are not attacked with the same apophatic vigour which Plotinus applies to his own speech 'about the One', but they are subjected to constant qualification, hedging and paradoxical formulations. We might expect, then, that an account of the philosophic ascent should be a locus of philosophic silence, the performance of which

[70] Ll. 24-8, also discussed p. 61.

increases incrementally according to the level of knowing-being under discussion. Put another way, Plotinus speaks in different philosophic registers depending on which level of reality he is addressing, and the degree to which language is thought to be able to capture the reality in question is in inverse proportion to that level's position up the chain of being. As the philosopher ascends, the ability for discourse to capture his journey decreases.

Hiding and Revealing the Philosophic Ascent

The process of *anagôgê* may be said to have theoretical and practical components, corresponding to the two different types of aphairesis. It is seen by Plotinus as beginning with instruction in the basic sciences, with a gradual, step-by-step movement toward higher conceptual realms. The negative and qualified positive methods of exposition explored above belong to this first stage. The relationship between the discursive and non-discursive components of the journey are well-described at the opening of Treatise 20, *On Dialectic*:

> What skill or method or practice leads us up (ἀνάγει) to where we need to go? We may take it that where it is we need to get to – to the good and the first principle – is agreed, and demonstrated by many proofs. And, indeed, this process of proof was a kind of ascent (ἀναγωγή τις ἦν).[71]

Plotinus goes on to discuss the aspirant's entry into *nous*, described topographically, and traversal of the noetic territory to its 'highest point', nearest to the One (ll. 13–18). At this stage of the process *dianoia* has been left behind, and Plotinus' qualification of his school's dialectical discussions as ἀναγωγή τις should be read as just that: 'a kind of ascent', rather than the true ascent. We may adduce Treatise 32 (ll. 17–21), where the seeker must abandon sensory perception and even *nous* in the quest for the first principle.

In concentrating on the post-discursive part of Plotinus' ἀναγωγή, I am not suggesting that he undervalues the practice of discursive reasoning. Indeed, without philosophic understanding and proper beliefs about reality, the further ascent is impossible. Plotinus attacks the Gnostics for attempting to bypass this process through their alleged access to higher realities:

[71] I.3[20]1.1-5.

> This is fabrication (καινολογούντων) with a view to establishing their own *hairesis*. For, as if they had nothing to do with the ancient Hellenic [*hairesis*], they fabricate these things, knowing full well that the Hellenes speak – without arrogance – of ascents out of the cave and of gradual progress by small degrees toward a truer vision.[72]

There can be no short-cuts to the higher ascent; one must undergo the process of education which the 'Hellenic ancients' described in their Allegory of the Cave.

Plotinus also ascribes a persuasive function to philosophic discourse: the soul in *nous* has no need of persuasion, since it is present to self-affirming truths, but the embodied soul may require persuasion concerning higher realms of being.[73] Discourse can have a further, hortatory role, whereby the soul is inspired to undertake the quest for reality.[74] Although the One is unsayable and unwriteable, when we speak and write we 'impel toward it' (λέγομεν καὶ γράφομεν πέμποντες εἰς αὐτό), an unusual turn of phrase which calls to mind the image of Plotinus pushing his students up the foothills of philosophic endeavour by main force.[75] However, all discursive formulations, such as the name 'one', even understood as a negation of multiplicity, will have to be left behind in the course of the practical ascent (Treatise 32, ll. 26–7). The ascent itself is absent from the text, since it goes beyond discursivity.[76]

Plotinus' treatments of the ascent are the most powerful passages in the *Enneads*.[77] They may be divided into two types for convenience – discursive aphairetic passages and practical ascent narratives – but the types often overlap. The aphairetic passages discuss the concepts which must be removed in the course of the ascent; we have encountered them already. They often call upon all the mental resources of the reader to follow Plotinus as he strips away every concept. But in the practical narrative descriptions, it is no longer concepts which need removing from the soul, but ontological and epistemological qualities such as multiplicity and Otherness. The ascent narratives are another kind of writing entirely, and call upon the heart as well as the mind.

[72] II.9[33]6.5-10.
[73] V.3[49]6.8-24.
[74] E.g. V.8[31]13.4.
[75] VI.9[9]4.11-16; see also *ibid.* 13–14.
[76] Cf. useful comments at Mazur 2010, 5.
[77] These include I.6[1]7.1–19, 9.6–25; IV.8[6]1.1–11; VI.9[9]3.14–27, 4.1–30, 7.1–23, 9.24–60, 10.9–21, 11.4–25, 36–46; III.8[30]9.19–32, 10.28–35; V.8[31]11.1–19; V.5[32]4.1–12, 7.31–8.23; VI.7[38]31.5–35, 34.1–22, 35.1–45, 36.10–26; VI.8[39]15.14–23, 19.1–16; V.3[49]4.4–15, 17.16–39.

Plotinian ascent narratives have a hortatory function; evocations of the beautiful narrative passages from Plato's *Symposium* and *Phædrus*[78] combine with original compositions describing the beauties of the noetic realm,[79] and kataphatic descriptions of the encounter with the One, abounding in metaphors of light and illumination, touching and intimate contact.[80] Some passages evoke erotic imagery drawing on Plato's *Symposium* and a range of tactile descriptions which verge on the 'erotic' in the more everyday sense of the term: the lover finds satiety in the beloved, and the two cannot be separated in their moment of joining.[81] Such passages are clearly intended to kindle *erôs* in the soul of the reader for the true philosophic goods of *nous* and the One, and to turn it away from the apparent goods of the sensory world.

Yet in these narratives the erotic drive of the soul's yearning to return to its source seems sometimes to overwhelm the determination to unsay any attribution of the One which we have seen in Plotinus' text, causing the philosopher utterly to transgress against the limits he himself puts on speaking. Descriptions of the vision of the One and of touching the One, in particular, bring a paradoxical concreteness into the carefully constructed indeterminate mental space of direct unknowing. However, the substitution of concrete imagery, especially that drawing on the physical senses of sight and touch, can be read as distancing the reader from associating normal modes of knowing with contact with the One, while at the same time emphasising *presence*: the sense of touch cannot operate at a distance, and is thus an apt metaphor for a state of absolute togetherness with the first principle.[82] The Plotinian ascent narrative might thus be seen as the positive side to his written philosophy of transcendence, emphasising the presence of the soul to the One just as the negative apophatic and aphairetic techniques distance it and affirm only its absence.

But the positive mental pictures evoked by these passages are often turned to apophatic account; often, at the height of an ascent narrative, a note of ambiguity or indeterminacy will intrude, the effect of which is

[78] I.6[1]7 is a classic Plotinian evocation of *Smp*. 211e1 and *Phdr*. 247b5-6 in the context of vision of the One. Many others may be found in the *index fontium*, H + S 2.

[79] E.g. the descriptions in Treatise 31, *On the Noetic Beauty*.

[80] Illumination: we have seen V.3[49]17.21–8 (cited p. 219); see Mazur 2010, 62–65. Cf. VI.7[38]36.10–26. The stock Platonist comparison of the One to the sun (e.g. V.5[32]8) is also common. *Nous* is also often described in terms of light: it is like an illuminated sphere (VI.7.15.24–5). See especially Beierwaltes 1961. On touching the One, see Chapter 6, n. 188.

[81] VI.7[38]34.8–14; VI.9[9]4.16–21; VI.7[38]35.23–32. See Mazur 2009 on erotic contact with the One in Plotinus.

[82] Cf. Bréhier 1958, 157.

heightened by the positive descriptions of the narrative. One example of this comes at the end of our exemplary passage:

> It was posited as well and fairly as possible by the one who posited it, but it is not worthy even as a means of clarifying that nature, which cannot be heard, nor understood by one who hears, but, if at all, by one who sees. But if the one who sees seeks to look upon a Form, he will not know this.[83]

The identity of 'this' (ἐκεῖνος) in the final line may be a Form (i.e., as Armstrong translates, 'But if the seer tries to look at a form, he will not know even that.'), but it may also be the One itself – in the attempt to define the One, to make it intelligible, the seeker loses the One.

The Religious Register in Plotinian Ascent Narratives

Even with the vast stylistic differences between them, Plotinus' ascent narratives remind the reader of nothing in Middle Platonist philosophy so much as the visionary narratives of Sethian Gnostic treatises (see page 171), and the Hermetic *Poimandres* (see page 167).[84] Even the noetic ascent described by Philo of Alexandria (see page 174) does not reach the levels of narrative immediacy which Plotinus brings to his subject. His descriptions of the higher stages of the ascent also sometimes draw directly on imagery from the mysteries. We have seen that the final stage of philosophic achievement was widely associated with *epopteia* or the culmination of the mystic ritual, and that Plotinus characterises the One as a *theama*. In his narrative mode, Plotinus employs a religious register absent elsewhere in the *Enneads*.

One of the most striking images for the ascent, which Plotinus uses repeatedly, is that of a temple, with its sacred inner precinct to be entered only by the initiate. In Treatise 1, one of Plotinus' richest in terms of ascent imagery, the philosopher asks: 'How will anyone see the "inconceivable beauty" (Pl. *R.* 509a6) which remains in the holy sanctuaries and does not emerge, lest some uninitiated person should see it?' The beauty in question is that of the One, which, in this treatise at least, Plotinus seems happy to equate with an ultimate beauty and erotic goal.[85] At V.1[10]6.12–15 the One is silent as if within a temple, and the aspirant must contemplate what corresponds to the statues which stand before the temple, i.e. the noetic world. In both of these passages we see the familiar combination

[83] V.5[32]6.
[84] Mazur 2003, 35–7 discusses a number of parallels in the *Hermetica* and Gnostic treatises.
[85] See Stern-Gillet 2000.

of the exclusion evoked through cultic tropes of secrecy and the idea of an ineffable contact with the One which is hidden by its nature from the reader.

A third evocation of the temple sanctuary takes place at VI.9[9]11, in a passage which contains nearly all the tropes of philosophic silence hitherto discussed. It begins with the equation, cited at the outset of the present work, of the silence of mystery cult and the ineffable nature of the One. It then proceeds to detail the union of the seer (the philosopher) with the seen (the One), whereby the seer has become one (8), and transcended *logos*, *noêsis* and even himself (11–12). He is like a man who has entered into the sanctuary and left behind the outer statues, which he again sees upon his descent. But in the sanctuary itself he sees 'not a statue or an image, but itself' (21–2). A cryptic statement follows:

> And it is said esoterically (αἰνίττεται) by the wise among interpreters of holy things, how it is that that god is seen; and a wise priest, understanding the esoteric meaning (αἴνιγμα), may there make the vision real, entering the sanctuary.[86]

This is the only enigma in the *Enneads* where Plotinus gives no indication as to what it is he is interpreting. It may be a reference to the symbolic architecture of the Hellenic sanctuary (a supposition perhaps made more likely by his other 'readings' of architecture and statuary, discussed page 132). But this reading does not seem to fit the text very well, and one suspects that, for once, Plotinus is actually referring to some mystic saying, perhaps even a secret doctrine, which he does not share with the reader. What is at any rate certain is that he is discussing 'secret knowledge' – that is, advertising the fact that the matter under discussion is 'a secret'. But the passage as a whole serves as a kind of invitation to the aspiring philosopher to become the 'wise priest' who enters the sanctuary.

In Treatise 31 Plotinus suggests a thought experiment which illustrates another aspect of this religious register in action. In order to form some idea of what the noetic world is like, the reader is asked to envision the entire sensory universe, with all its parts intact and visible all together, as though inside a transparent sphere. This sphere is to include absolutely everything that exists in the world. Holding on to this image, the soul then imagines another sphere, but removes from it mass, places and the image of matter (the verb is ἄφελε – we are engaged here in conceptual

[86] VI.9[9]11.27-30.

aphairesis). The reader is not simply to construct a smaller sphere than the first, but rather to 'Call the god who made that whose image you have, and pray that he come. And may he come, bringing the cosmos of himself (τὸν αὑτοῦ κόσμον φέρων).'[87]

This thought experiment contains a fascinating element of religious practice: it calls upon the student to pray to *nous*. This passage can be regarded as a metaphorical or 'merely stylistic' embellishment to Plotinus' concern with teaching the reader something of the nature of *nous* through his thought-experiment, but we have every reason to believe that it is not intended metaphorically at all, but as a genuine recommendation for prayer, philosophically understood.[88] Be that as it may, we should pay attention to the way in which Plotinus' thought experiment is never completed; having imagined the sphere of the sensory world, and then preparing a corresponding sphere to represent the noetic world, Plotinus abruptly changes register and calls for an act, not of philosophic imagination, but of devotion. Once again, the gap between what the discursive mind is capable of and the noetic reality is emphasised, in this case through the abandonment of a discursive methodology before it is completed in favour of an appeal to the divine power of the noetic god himself.

This brings us to an important shift of register commonly employed by Plotinus in accounts of *anagôgê*, one which transfers from the philosophical register of discursive aphairesis and metaphysics to the subjective, personal register.[89] Treatise I.6[1], *On Beauty*, winds its way between theoretical exposition, first-person plural exhortation and second-person singular commands in its evocation of the noetic glories, emphasising their immediate availability to philosophers who 'ascend into themselves and look'.[90] Treatise VI.7[38], *On the Forms and the Good*, shifts from a long exposition of the nature of the first principle to a phenomenological treatment of the soul's erotic yearning for it, which drives the ascent.[91] The first section of treatise VI.9[9]4, one of Plotinus' deepest explorations of apophatic writing, raises numerous problems about predicating the

[87] V.8[31]9.13-15.

[88] For Plotinus' theory of the efficacy of prayer, see IV.4[28]30 (prayers answered by the heavenly bodies, which are gods).

[89] In addition to the passages discussed below, see e.g. VI.5[23]7.11; V.8[31]11.1; V.5[32]7.31; VI.8[39]15.14; V.3[49]17.28, noted by Mazur 2010, 5, n. 14.

[90] I.6[1]9.7: ἄναγε ἐπὶ σαυτὸν καὶ ἴδε.

[91] VI.7[38]22.1 *ad fin.*

highest reality with any attributes; it then shifts register (4), stating that these perplexities arise especially because the soul's 'knowledge' of the One is not knowledge, but a kind of presence greater than knowledge: here the shift in register clearly prioritises lived experience over theoretical considerations.

Plotinus' treatment of the philosophic ascent is a complex locus for hiding and revealing. As we saw in the previous chapter, the presence of *nous* and the One are, from the point of view of discourse, inaccessible, because unsayable, nor even thinkable in any normal sense of the term. But at the same time, they are always present, *in potentia*, to anyone capable of receiving them. This presence is thus depicted as being open, available and, indeed, *already* present; at the same time, it is depicted as perpetually absent from the text itself. Any description of the ineffable ascent toward the One will thus be a hiding and a revealing.

We might bring the question of philosophic silence in Plotinus' accounts of *anagôgê* down to earth in a more sociological context. Plato had laid the foundations for a culture of philosophic elitism which was a basic ideological assumption in Platonism. This elitism in Plato is determined by an intensive and arduous process of philosophical education through dialectical practice, the higher reaches of which are sometimes depicted in terms drawing on mystery narrations or expressed as being unwritable. Some reference has been made to Platonist curricula and to the step-by-step progress toward the truth which the Platonists saw as the true path of the ancients. We can contextualise Plotinus' idea of the ascent within this culture of elitism: in positing and claiming ineffable inner states, Plotinus is in fact making a strong claim to the highest philosophic achievement.

He is of course withholding access to this achievement; it is ineffable, and thus absent from the text. The Seventh Platonic Epistle states that a certain, high matter of philosophic import is 'not sayable like other studies'; Plotinus both 'says' what this matter is – the ontology and epistemology of the highest reality – and also maintains its status as 'not writable'. The ineffable union with the first principle, regarded from a late antique social perspective, functions as 'secret knowledge' of a new type, whose character is determined by the new ideas of transcendence arising in the first centuries CE. Unlike earlier forms of 'secret knowledge', it is conceived as fully immune to being revealed. Plotinus thus in a sense raises the stakes of Platonist elitism: no course of education, however intensive and arduous, could result in an achievement to trump the encounter with the ineffable supreme principle, and the ineffability of the encounter itself removes it from the field of the refutable.

Indeterminacy and Monism

The literary result which I call 'indeterminacy' in Plotinus occurs when a proposition ('the One exists', '*nous* cannot know the One directly', 'the soul has a lower faculty of *noêsis* within her') is contradicted by another proposition ('the One does not exist', '*nous* knows the One directly', 'the soul has never descended below *nous*') in such a way that neither proposition can be said to be entirely true nor entirely false. A third, unsaid proposition hovers between the two, an indeterminate mental space which might possibly be described through a third proposition combining both options, but even then remains indeterminate ('the One neither exists nor does not exist, but some third option which is perforce unstated', etc.). The difference between indeterminate groupings of propositions of this type and saying nothing at all can only be that the indeterminations point the reader in a certain direction. The elative aspect of much indeterminate negative theology is a case in point: the reader cannot be told what God is, but he can be told that God exceeds or transcends a number of perfectly sayable attributes: goodness, wisdom, perfection, etc. The reader's inner gaze is focused 'upwards'.

'Elative indeterminism' can be a helpful concept when applied to the modes of knowing whereby the soul approaches the ineffable. The improper use of *gnôsis* to describe the contact with the One cited above (page 218) might of course be an example of Plotinian terminological looseness, but in the context in which it appears, alongside touching and vision of the One, it should more likely be understood as an 'improper' use of a finite term to stand for the infinite, or indeterminate, term which occupies the place at the top of the chain of being which it occupies. In other words, just as the One can be said to have 'quasi-being',[92] or more loosely as simply having being, with the οἷον understood,[93] to indicate that it is 'beyond being' but the source of being, so the application of a type of knowing to the One in one context which is denied elsewhere may be read as pointing toward a kind of knowing that is beyond knowing – toward ineffable unknowing.

Plotinus, I would argue, uses indeterminations in ways unique to him as a philosopher; several of these are discussed in what follows. But what is of the greatest interest to the present discussion is the interference between

[92] VI.8[39]13.27: τῇ οἷον οὐσίᾳ.

[93] In fact, every time Plotinus uses the verb εἶναι with regard to the One, even as a copula, he makes such an attribution. As we have seen, we must remove even the 'is' from our concept of the One (VI.8[39]8.14-15).

registers in these acts of unsaying: the application of rhetorics of secrecy to statements of ineffability (hiding the self-hidden), or the use of religious language in similar contexts (dovetailing the inviolate secrecy of the mysteries with the inviolable secret of the ineffable) being the most common.

Blurring the Edges of Reality

The principal dynamics of Plotinus' metaphysics occur at the 'boundaries' between the hypostases. The problem goes back to the principle of 'like is only known by like', which, for Plotinus, has an ontological dimension as well. How can being arise from non-being, and how can the non-discursive consciousness of *nous* become discursive consciousness in the lower forms of soul? The former problem is perhaps the most philosophically serious. At the 'borders' between types of knowing and being, problems of incommensurability are met, and philosophy has to deal with them.

As suggested above, Plotinus addresses these problems by 'blurring' the borders between the hypostases. Hypostases *do* differ one from the other; but at their points of interaction they shade into each other: Plotinian reality is a continuum. Plotinus' dissection of reality into parts is counterbalanced by a strong literary practice of reintegration, whereby he establishes and then deconstructs the boundaries between hypostases. The boundaries are indeterminate. This is not to suggest that Plotinus feels there is an actual *overlap* between hypostases; there is an unbroken continuum. But, as the discussion above has shown, Plotinus depicts such an overlap in his writing. His reasons for so doing, I argue, is to leave these 'boundaries' undetermined in the text. This is a strategy which allows him to speak of a monistic, uninterrupted continuum while still being able as an author to speak of discrete realities comprising that continuum, and to utilise different registers and perspectives to combine multiple, incomplete descriptions of realities which he feels are not susceptible to discursive formulation.

This is my global reading of the multiple accounts Plotinus gives of the relationship between *nous* and the individual soul.[94] The undescended soul both is and is not separate from *nous*. Viewed from the perspective of *dianoia*, the soul in some sense possesses *nous* as a faculty described in various ways; viewed from the standpoint of *nous* – that is, *sub specie æternitatis* – soul, or its highest part, simply does not descend into time and space, and so cannot be said to be outside *nous*. The ongoing interpretative debate as

[94] These are summarised p. 198.

to whether Plotinus means to say that there is only a single *nous* in which all souls that engage in *noêsis* participate in some manner, or whether the 'apex of soul' has a subsidiary noetic principle within it should address this indeterminacy. We should not cease to investigate Plotinus' explorations of this liminal region of metaphysics, but we should be aware that he will not give a single answer to the question 'how does *nous* relate to soul?' His multiple and conflicting accounts, I argue, give rise to an indeterminate, unsaid – indeed, silent – account, corresponding to the reality of the situation as Plotinus conceives it, but escaping discursive formulation.

More problematic still is the boundary between *nous* and the One.[95] In the outline of modes of knowing in Plotinus in the previous chapter this region was discussed under three different headings. (1) The question was raised of a non-discursive mode of direct knowing of the One – i.e., a faculty or part of *nous*, perhaps akin to the 'flower of *nous*' of the *Chaldæan Oracles*, which is able to apprehend the first principle. Plotinus posits such a faculty or part, but its nature is indeterminate: it ceases to be *nous* insofar as it apprehends the One, but it is *nous* when it apprehends an image of the One, containing multiplicity. Alternately, it may be described as a *nous* which is not *nous* within the One itself. (2) A direct mode of unknowing was also posited: this is generally discussed by Plotinus in the context of the individual soul on its journey toward the One, but, when we recall that the soul will have become *nous*, and occupied or become the apex of *nous* in the process, we see that this faculty is similar or possibly identical to the first, although described differently. (3) Some discussion was also made of the modes of knowing which Plotinus attributes to the One itself: these are to be understood in parallel with his many denials that the One possesses anything which might be called consciousness, and are described with verbs of knowing from outside the normal Platonist repertoire such as *epibolê* or *neusis*, or alternately by elative forms such as *hypernoêsis*.[96] They are also described as self-directed; in other words, the One's 'knowing' is always a 'knowing' of itself. There is a case to be made that these modes of 'self-unknowing' attributed to the One are a third way of describing the same phenomenon.[97]

In each case, then, according to this reading, the same phenomenon is described from three different registers: from the perspective of soul, the direct unknowing of the One is the final stage in a transformative process

[95] Bussanich 1988 is the best study on this problem.
[96] See p. 210.
[97] This is argued by Mazur 2010.

of ascent up the levels of being and knowing. From the perspective of *nous*, it is a return to its source in contemplation, resulting in the loss of its identity as *nous* in an indeterminate, timeless moment 'before' it becomes *nous*. From the perspective of the One, there is an internal action which can sometimes be described as a mode of self-apprehension, through which the One contemplates its own 'contents'. We may add that, in narratives of ascent, particularly at the end of Treatise 9, the soul and the One are described in strongly unitary language;[98] the philosophic register may dramatically jump from the level of soul to that of the One. As in the case of *nous* and the One, where there is something of *nous* in the One which may alternately be described as something of the One in *nous*, soul possesses something of the One in itself, which may be expressed, at the highest level of epistemology-ontology, as the One having soul within it.

The Indeterminate Self

As we have seen (page 190), human identity is indeterminate for Plotinus. This is in fact perhaps the most undervalued fact of his philosophy: its enormous implications include the fact that human beings, or at least philosophers, can attain to godhood, not in any metaphorical sense, but in the most concrete terms, through becoming *nous*, and then perhaps passing beyond even that supreme godhead to the transcendent source of all. The indeterminacy of the individual self is key, because there is no possible way, in a Platonist world-view, that a limited soul, attached to matter and entrenched in time and space, could attain to these supernal states, but a soul which is *essentially* identified with higher states of being, and only *accidentally* associated with matter, can make the transition. Indeed, such a soul need only realise, through its presence to higher realities, that the transition is, as it were, already made, for it to be instantiated.

Plotinus' writing of indeterminacy with regard to the soul and its modes of knowing-being, then, should be seen as a means of teaching the embodied soul of its own spiritual heritage. This, in my eyes, is the over-arching function of Plotinus' multiple, contradictory accounts of the relationships between epistemological-ontological realms. The relationship between *noêsis* and discursive thought is described in a number of ways. All forms of cognition are denied to the One itself, but then Plotinus sometimes

[98] At VI.9[9]11.21 the ambiguity of αὐτός makes it entirely unclear whether Plotinus is referring to the One or to the soul. Taken in its context, one of the strongest Plotinian narratives of the union of soul and the One, it is clear that this is an artfully expressed indetermination that uses the natural potential for indeterminacy inherent in the Greek demonstrative for a literary-philosophical effect quite beyond the normal range of explanatory possibilities.

attributes to it a kind of hyper-perception. In each of these cases, in order to grasp the level above it, the lower level must in some way cease to be itself, but in each case Plotinus leaves the exact nature of this transformation indeterminate. I would argue that, in doing so, he wishes to militate against the reader's supplying easy, formulaic schemas to transcendental cognition, concentrating instead on penetrating these states in their reality, which will transcend discourse.

Conclusion

The thesis of Odo Casel was that the cultural trope of *silentium philosophorum* in antiquity was in large part a transference over time of religious *arcana* – actual doctrinal secrets, and the culture of secrecy surrounding them – to the idea of an ineffable reality which could not, by its own nature, be revealed.[1] The evidence traced in the present volume supports this analysis in many respects. There is however an important proviso: for Casel, and most scholars after him, the late antique philosophic use of the themes of mystic silence and other rhetorics of concealment and secrecy was entirely metaphorical. The mystic arcanum *stood for* the ineffable first god.

I would argue that this is too simple, and ignores what written secrecy and written silence have in common: they both advertise a truth to which the author is privy and the reader is not. Throughout the history of philosophic secrecy, concealment was rarely the main aim, but rather revealing the existence of privileged knowledge on the part of the philosopher. The act of written hiding and revealing applies equally well to the hidden *arcanum* which must be kept from the uninitiated and the openly announced, but ineffable, reality.

Discussing the interference between secrecy and ineffability found in Plotinus, Jean Pépin poses the question, without answering it, of why and how one would guard against communicating the incommunicable, and whether it makes sense to forbid the impossible.[2] It is hoped that this book has posed some answers to the 'how' part of the question: forbidding communication of the ineffable should be understood as an exercise of rhetorical hiding and revealing, part of a long Platonist tradition of treating the highest matters of philosophy as 'secret knowledge'. Even in the earliest sources cited in this book, such as the mysteries and the Presocratic

[1] Casel 1919.
[2] Pépin 1984, 32.

poets, the concerns of secrecy are at least as much to do with identity and exclusion and with the identification of the 'mystery' as a mystery as with the concealment of genuine secrets. Keeping this in mind, the seeming paradox of the Plotinian move to conceal the ineffable should become less inexplicable. Platonist philosophic silence has its own internal logic, but this logic only makes sense if we cease to imagine that the exercise of secrecy either implies secrets or even necessarily requires the presumption that there are secrets. All it requires is a textual absence, something that is referred to but not revealed, but to which the author claims access.

The 'why' part of Pépin's question leads to more treacherous ground. This book has largely refrained from speculating on the motives of authors, a field of inquiry that, like the Plotinian ineffable, is implied by the text but never present in the text itself. In closing, however, I want to transgress somewhat against my own methodological boundary in this respect, and indulge in some speculation about Plotinus' motives in his transformation of philosophic silence.

Philosophic Silence and Symbolic Capital

Plotinian philosophy is, in a sense, a tightly 'closed' phenomenon. The philosopher's initial reluctance to publish shows a practical concern with privileging of knowledge in a concrete sense, and a genuine belief that certain matters were not fit for public consumption. Plotinus' approval of Porphyry's use of the esoteric in his poem *The Sacred Marriage* shows that he saw the practice of esotericism as a suitable way of maintaining the privileged nature of high philosophic matters. These anecdotes receive corroboration from the *Enneads*: the anti-Gnostic polemic, in particular, shows Plotinus' concern with maintaining the educational requirements for membership in the philosophic elite, and corresponding contempt of those who would 'jump the queue' of formal Platonist *paideia* in a presumptuous claim to privileged access to the higher realities.[3] In the passage from this treatise cited on page 229, the cultural prestige of the ancient lineage (in this case embodied in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, *R.* 514a ff.) is brought in to defend what is, indeed, a conservative conception of philosophic education reserved for a select few. Plotinus' esoteric reading of his

[3] The Gnostics include among their number the meanest (φαυλοτάτους) sort of people (II.9[33]18.17-19; cf. 5.8, where even the meanest (φαυλοτάτων) of men are said to be capable of arriving at truth by the Gnostics); cf. Athanassiadi 2006, 134. *Ibid.* 9.6-11 is a conservative defence of a rigidly hierarchical society, divided into σπουδαῖοι, who engage in philosophy, and the mass of humanity, who essentially exist to cater to the physical needs of the former class.

tradition served to construct unanimity among a wide range of privileged authorities, but, by framing these authorities with their *a priori* access to the truth in terms of an esoteric discourse, it also reveals the degree to which Plotinus saw this kind of discourse as proper and fitting. If the ancients wrote esoterically, then certain matters of philosophy really ought to be hidden from the masses. The overarching hermeneutic of esoteric perennialism should be taken into account in this context: the truth is the possession of the Tradition, but it is to some degree hidden from the masses by the criterion of education in the proper interpretative tools. Treating it as a secret, then, is an assertion of this possession.

Plotinian anthropology and metaphysics add additional aspects of privilege to the basic tropes of Platonist elitism. For Plotinus, as for no previous Platonist philosopher whose works survive, the loci of philosophic achievement are moved from admittedly difficult, but theoretically accessible achievements – dialectical skill, the ability to construct a coherent and persuasive world-view, the knowledge of how to deal adequately with the philosophical materials bequeathed by the school's founders -- to inner states of spiritual power. The ability to share the truth openly as a criterion of philosophic excellence was being replaced by the ability to persuade others that one *had* the truth.

We have seen this played out in the *Life*, where Porphyry not only affirms that Plotinus had attained to elevated inner states, but attacks the Gnostics in Plotinus' circle for denying that Plato himself had attained to the deepest noetic being.[4] From the preceding discussion of Plotinian anthropology on the one hand, and Sethian visionary ascent treatises on the other, it will be clear that what was at stake here was whether or not Plato had himself 'made the ascent', or more probably a controversy about which level he had reached in his ascent. It will not have been a dispute over whether he was correct in his philosophical writings. In other words, Porphyry is countering Gnostic claims to states of spiritual power – to whose nature the ascent narratives of the *Allogenes*, *Zostrianos* and other texts give us possible clues[5] – with Plato's (and by extension Plotinus') own spiritual achievements. Viewed macroscopically, this is one aspect of the broad shift away from the claim to a coherent account of reality as a primary source of authority, and toward a model of personal spiritual power, which we see in the later Platonist biographies and in the hagiographies of their Christian opponents.[6]

[4] See p. 45.
[5] See p. 171.
[6] See especially Brown 1971a, Fowden 1982 on the late antique pagan philosopher as 'holy man'; Cox 1983.

One of the most common themes in the Platonist biographies of late antiquity is that of the astounding, or even miraculous, powers of perception, attention and insight attributed to philosophers;[7] Porphyry depicts Plotinus performing many wonderful feats of perspicacity such as discovering a slave who stole a necklace by simply reviewing the assembled slaves and indicating the culprit, correctly predicting the future lives of children under his care and once, when Porphyry was feeling suicidal, divining the straits he was in and dissuading him from this rash course of action.[8] He is also able, according to Porphyry, to repel a sorcerous attack by a jealous rival philosopher called Olympius through the sheer power of his soul.[9] Porphyry also adduces two very strong corroborating witnesses to Plotinus spiritual power: the Egyptian priest, whose exclamation that Plotinus' guardian *daimôn* was in fact a god gave traditional Platonist Orientalist support for this claim, and the gods themselves, cited in the form of the Apolline oracle which Plotinus' pupil Amelius sought out upon the philosopher's death, indicating that Plotinus, once a human being, had attained to a higher state than the merely human, and now dwelt in company with Plato and Pythagoras in a higher world.[10]

The contact of the accomplished philosopher with truth granted him wisdom, and this wisdom is expressed, in the biographies, as powers beyond the ken of normal men. But what is especially relevant for this discussion is the fact that the states which are the inner concomitant of this power are inaccessible, hedged about with the language of ineffability. The philosophic *anagôgê* is pre-eminently the preserve of a philosophic elite, and its ineffability acts precisely like the command of secrecy in the mysteries, to separate the 'initiated' from the masses of 'profane'.

There is a great concern with hierarchy among philosophical students in the Late Platonist biographies, and Porphyry's *Life* is no exception. It is significant that Porphyry, whose concern with a curricular, step-by-step approach to Platonic education has been discussed on page 107, discusses Plotinus' students and their relative merits,[11] but attributes only to his master and himself the ultimate attainment of ineffable union with

[7] See Cox 1983, 23–5.

[8] *Plot.* 11. Cf. Apollonius of Tyana's many feats of prediction and second sight, e.g. Philostr. *V.A.* V.11; V.18; V.24; V.30; V.42.

[9] *Ibid.* 10 1 ff.

[10] *Ibid.* 22–23. On this oracle, see Goulet 1982.

[11] *Plot.* 7 distinguishes between the ἀκροαταί and ζηλοται among Plotinus' students; see Lim 1995, 37–9; Edwards 2000, 14 n. 17. Porphyry also devotes a great deal of discussion to Amelius, his chief rival for first place among Plotinus' students, often subtly and not-so-subtly indicating his own superiority (e.g. 10.33 ff; 21.18).

the first principle.[12] This gives us an insight into a process whereby the traditional hierarchies of Platonist *paideia*, which might be called hierarchies of knowledge or wisdom, were being transformed into epistemologic-ontologic hierarchies, or hierarchies of spiritual power. These states were never disconnected from the idea of wisdom, but wisdom, for Plotinus and his successors, was radically transformed into a state of being.[13] Porphyry's self-serving portrayal of himself as Plotinus' premier student and successor is apparent throughout the *Life*, and his trump-card is a state of ineffable union which is not, by its nature, subject to any scrutiny or refutation. As with the invocation of the mysteries in Plutarchian dialogue, or of the mysteries of philosophy by Apuleius,[14] the claim to ineffable states of knowing and being makes an unfalsifiable claim that cannot be refuted by the rules of dialectic. The self-hiding secret can be just as powerful as the concealed secret.

Plotinus' social standing remains somewhat of a mystery; we know little of his early life and nothing of his family, but we are told that he had the ear of at least one emperor,[15] and claimed men of senatorial rank among his students.[16] We also know that he enjoyed the use of various *villas* and other types of patronage.[17] Benefits of this type seem to have been the unofficial salary of the Platonist philosopher, who was prohibited by Platonic precedent from accepting payment for teaching;[18] Plotinus was, in this sense, a very successful philosopher if these indicators are anything to go by.

[12] See p. 35.

[13] Plotinus even calls σοφία a hypostasis (see Appendix C, p. 262).

[14] See p. 108 ff.

[15] Plotinus' journey to the East in search of barbarian wisdom with the Emperor Gordian's expeditionary force (Porph. *Plot.* 3 13-23) has too much of the tropological in it to be taken literally. The quest for wisdom, the wise barbarians at whose feet Pythagoras and Plato had also studied and even the συμβουλητικὸς φιλόσοφος, the philosophic adviser brought along on military campaigns (on whom see Rawson 1989), were established tropes. He doubtless accompanied the expedition, and probably had some introduction to the emperor's circle (see Hadot 1993, 78), but more than this we cannot say (cf. Blumenthal 1987, 531). Plotinus' project to found an ideal city-state based on 'the laws of Plato' and to be called Platonopolis was approved by the emperor Galienus (who, along with his wife Salonina, greatly honoured Plotinus), according to Porphyry (*Plot.* 12). Even taking Porphyry's tendency to 'manage' information in the *Life*, I think we must assume at least some historical connection between the philosopher and the emperor based on this anecdote.

[16] Porph. *Plot.* 7 29 ff.

[17] According to Porphyry, Plotinus received the guardianship of the children of many students 'of the highest rank' at the point of their deaths, along with their property (*Plot.* 9 5-9). Porphyry emphasises that this was because the parents considered Plotinus a 'holy and divine guardian' (ἱερῷ τινι καὶ θείῳ φύλακι, 9.9), and of course there is no suggestion that Plotinus made illicit use of the property so obtained, but was rather a scrupulous and just guardian (12-16). The social capital and class acceptance implied by having one's house full of the children of the upper classes is nevertheless obvious. Plotinus made use of the country estate of his student Zethus (*ibid.* 7.22-3), and his needs in his final illness were catered to partly by this estate and partly by that of Castricius Firmus (*ibid.* 2.20-23).

[18] See Dillon 2002, 34–35.

We should probably assume that Plotinus came from at least a well-off background, if not an important family, for he would otherwise not have had the leisure to study philosophy in the first place.[19] But taking this into account, it seems very likely that some at least of the high esteem he enjoyed should be attributed to his mastery of the spiritual world. Like the pagan and Christian saints of his time and succeeding centuries, he possessed the spiritual power of one who had achieved the highest initiation, who had mastered the invisible worlds and who had a unique and privileged access to the truth. Platonist philosophic silence had existed since at least the Middle Platonists, but the claims to knowledge which it supported had increased in ambition and scope over time.

Philosophic Silence and Philosophic Openness in Plotinus

Am I then arguing that philosophic silence was entirely an exercise of social power, and that Plotinus' philosophy of transcendence aimed solely to establish him as a pre-eminent philosopher? The reader could be forgiven for thinking this, but it is, emphatically, not the case. A useful parallel might be drawn with the discourse of spiritual power developing concurrently in the Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is right to say that certain powers ascribed to the priest through his liturgical and other ritual functions – baptism, absolution, communion and even excommunication – were forms of symbolic capital with very concrete social ramifications. It would, however, never be satisfactory to say that this is *all* these powers were. In many cases, the fact that he was exercising a kind of social power through his divinely ordained priestly functions will not have crossed the mind of a pious priest, although he will have recognised the necessity that these powers be limited to a certain class of specialists, and for many other exclusionary practices.

We should thus be awake to the assumptions of Platonist elitism, and its extended Late Platonist form which included a sacralised idea of philosophy and inner states of power as elite privileges, lying behind Plotinian discourse. We should also be aware of the exclusionary performances of public secrecy in the various forms which they take in Plotinus' writing. But we would not posit that these social facts entirely account for Plotinus' *motives*. Any reader of the *Enneads* or of Porphyry's *Life* will be impressed by a sense of Plotinus' benevolence and of a genuine desire on his part to give the gift of the truth to his hearers and readers – a quality of gentleness

[19] Late antique philosophers, especially Platonist philosophers, seem to have come from wealthy backgrounds (see Blumenthal 1978, 367; Fowden 1982, 48–49).

of the philosopher which Porphyry calls πραότης and Pierre Hadot has called 'douceur'.[20]

This book has delved into Plotinus' convoluted attempts to give some account of the highest realities, and of his denials of these very attempts. Perhaps too much weight has been placed on the strictly logical side of this apophatic discourse: there is no doubt that, for all his protestations and hesitations, Plotinus does wish to guide his students in a particular direction, toward a transcendent goal which he sees as the greatest of practical goods for the human soul. We need posit no mystical states of consciousness in order to attribute such a motive to Plotinus in his indeterminate writing of the interactions of levels of being and knowing; his metaphysics of knowing and being as it were demand that such states should exist and be available to philosophers.

It should be admitted however that, to maintain a model of Plotinus whose concerns in this regard are based purely in theory, rather than in his own lived encounters with what he considered higher states of being and knowing, is a reading which few who are deeply familiar with his texts will credit. This book does not deny 'Plotinus the mystic', whatever that may mean precisely; it seeks rather to take seriously Plotinus' own rigorous exclusion of his readers, *qua* readers, from the states he describes. We need not doubt Plotinus' extraordinary inner life, but we may, and indeed must, doubt our ability to come to terms with it in a philological study or even through the discursive pursuit of Plotinian dialectic. To do otherwise is in fact to ignore Plotinus' unsaying of the first principle, the encounter therewith and even his own ability to write an account of that encounter, and to apply a modern, academic 'arrogance of interpretation' to Plotinus' acts of written silence.[21]

In a way, the self-hiding secret that is the Plotinian ineffable removes some of the 'arrogance of interpretation' from his own brand of Platonic silence: the author does not reveal the truth, but one is left with a strong sense that he would have, if he felt that he could. If one accustoms oneself to the background of Platonist elitism and assumptions about the natural hierarchy of mankind, Plotinus comes across as the most generous of authors, indefatigably seeking to bestow the gift of the truth on his hearers. And it may be that, with his exceptionally intricate and developed discourse of indeterminacy, Plotinus goes further in the direction of truly 'saying' the ineffable than any of his more conservative forbears,

[20] Porph. *Plot.* 13 9; Hadot 1963, 74.
[21] On the 'arrogance of interpretation' see p. 140.

and, equally, than the thinkers who made up his Late Platonist legacy. Iamblichus, Proclus and others are philosophers who, for all their insistence on the formal rigours of apophatic language and strict negations, never seem to be able to conjure up the kind of ungraspable mental openness which Plotinus' discourses of the transcendent create in the reader's mind. Damascius may come closest, with his truly vexing negative dialectics, but his works lack the warmth, immediacy and narrative aspects of Plotinus' accounts of the philosophic quest. Plotinus seeks to open a literally infinite cognitive space capable of comprehending the incomprehensible

This 'openness' is actually a further paradox of Plotinian discourse. As an esoteric perennialist, a philosopher who praises esotericism in his students, and who was reluctant to publish his own works at all, Plotinus would seem to have no business broadcasting the highest secrets of the true philosophy as he does. Indeed, his philosophic seminar is described by Porphyry as open to all comers and he encouraged his listeners to question him, with the result that his classes were sometimes disorderly and 'full of idle talk' (*Plot.* 1 13; 3 35-8). While he read his philosophical tradition as esoteric, I have yet to find any evidence that Plotinus himself exercised esotericism.[22] He truly pursues his calling of 'exegete'.

But this is, of course, a problem, if the truth is to be hidden, or shielded from the eyes and ears of the unphilosophic masses. I see no straightforward way to account for this problem if it is approached in a literalist manner. If, however, we choose to view these matters in the context of a culture of philosophic silence, with its own rhetorical logic that established hiding and revealing as the proper approach to expressing the highest truths, it makes sense. I feel that the contours of the tradition of philosophic silence outlined in this book provided a set of norms of deportment which had an internal logic of its own, and the questions which modern interpreters might ask concerning the propriety or otherwise of this or that act of hiding and revealing were not the questions which the ancients asked. For them, spoken, written and gestural acts of hiding and revealing were a part of the way in which philosophy was to be conducted.

Plotinus was no passive inheritor of this tradition of philosophic silence; on the contrary, I would argue that his transformation of the primary locus of secrecy to the self-hiding secrets of the ineffable One and the soul's encounter therewith marked a radical transformation of this tradition. And

[22] Plotinus' reference to an undisclosed enigma cited on p. 233 is certainly an example of esoteric reading, and may have been an instance of esotericism; alternatively, it may have referred to a statement which was well-known to his audience and could have been supplied by them.

the most impressive result of this transformation is the way in which Plotinus is able to use written silence as a most eloquent and powerful tool of *expression*. The powers of language are subtle and, it seems likely, not yet fully understood. Every statement, even the most down-to-earth, has much in it of the unsaid, many levels of meaning which occur between the lines. It is in this very subtle, evanescent realm of communication that Plotinus' extended unfoldings of unsaying take effect.

Appendices

APPENDIX A

The Plotinian Idea of Tradition and 'Platonism'

Plotinus' self-definition in terms of tradition illuminates not only the particular lineage which he envisages, which in turn sheds light on aspects of his philosophy such as the authority of canonical sources and the role of the philosophic exegete, but also his defensive positioning of his philosophy vis à vis other schools. This construction of identity also sounds a cautionary note for modern readers of Plotinus. Plotinus defines the true philosophic path as one descending through a chosen lineage of Hellenic philosophers, a transmission paralleled by an esoteric transmission of truth through Hellenic religious institutions. What we nowhere see is Plotinus defining himself as a 'Platonist'.

Setting aside self-definition for a moment, it is clear, and worth emphasising, that Plotinus *is*, in fact, primarily indebted to the Platonic corpus in his philosophical project. In the *index fontium* to their edition of the *Enneads*, Henry and Schwyzer note hundreds of references to the Platonic corpus, roughly the same number as to all other authors taken together.[1] If the term 'Platonist' is taken to mean 'a philosopher treating Plato as a dogmatic thinker and considering his own thought to be in agreement with that of Plato', Plotinus is, in terms of the history of ideas, undoubtedly a Platonist.[2]

But it is essential not to overwrite Plotinus' understanding of his intellectual tradition with our own by ignoring the complexities of self-definition found in the *Enneads*. We may rightly consider him to be a Platonist, but this does not justify our stating that Plotinus *claims* to be an 'orthodox Platonist'.[3] The standard English translation of Armstrong regularly inserts the word 'Platonist' into the text, while πλατωνικός or equivalent terms

[1] H + S 1 Vol. III 436–462.

[2] This definition of 'Platonist' seems to be what scholars generally mean by the term, although it is itself rarely subjected to critical scrutiny or defined (but see n. 2).

[3] As claimed by Merlan 1970, 14 n. 1; cf. Athanassiadi 2006, 23.

never appear in the *Enneads*.[4] Armstrong's translation of εἴπερ ἄξιοι τῆς προσηγορίας φαμὲν εἶναι (V.8[31]4.55) as 'If we claim to be worthy of our title [of Platonists]' is an example of the translator overstepping the boundary between his identification and Plotinus' own. Other errors can arise from overextending this anachronistic category. Blumenthal writes, discussing Plotinus: 'All the Platonists of late antiquity regarded themselves as Platonists *tout simple* … The degree of self-deception involved in this self-concept is perhaps nowhere clearer than in their discussions of soul and intellect.'[5] To claim a self-identity for the Platonists which they did not claim for themselves, and then to berate them for failing to live up to it (in this case, mainly because of their use of Aristotelean ideas, which, of course, was an acceptable perennialist practice, as discussed in Chapter 3) is problematic to say the least, and perhaps involves a typically modern form of self-deception.

Plotinus' omission of 'Platonism' from the *Enneads* can be contextualised in terms of his approach to tradition. It must firstly be taken into account that Plotinus is not in the habit of naming either his sources or the schools of philosophy which he is discussing: Plato himself is mentioned by name only about forty-five times in the *Enneads* out of hundreds of references to the dialogues. Clearly, his name could often be taken as understood by an educated philosophic readership; sometimes, too, Plato is referred to simply as 'he', in a usage reminiscent of the Pythagorean *ipse dixit*.[6] But we often find Platonic doctrines cited, not simply anonymously, but with a positive attribution to the perennial philosophy under the name of 'the ancients'[7] or, in *Against the Gnostics*, that of 'the Hellenes'.[8] Far from being simply tacit references to Plato, these are ascriptions of Plato's thought to a larger tradition.

Plotinus, then, tends not to name his sources, even the most important, or the schools of thought under discussion. This might seem to argue for supplying the term 'Platonist' in translations of the *Enneads*, or at least in explanatory notes. After all, he names neither Stoics nor Epicureans, but deals with their ideas in unmistakable contexts where it is justifiable to insert their names in an explanatory manner; surely recognisably Platonist doctrines might be dealt with in the same way. To do so, however,

[4] E.g. Armstrong 2003 V.8[31]4.55 (vol. 5 p. 252); I.4[46]3.16–18 (vol. I, p. 179) *et passim.*
[5] Blumenthal 1996, 82.
[6] Rist 1964b, 57; cf. Charrue 1978, 40 on the use of ἔφη in a similar manner.
[7] E.g. III.7[45]1.13-16, 7.10–17; V.1[10]8.10–14.
[8] II.9[33]6 *passim*.

is to ignore the positive statements which Plotinus does make regarding the tradition to which he belongs, discussed in Chapter 4 of this book. These statements are rarely taken seriously in scholarship. Because modern scholars do not see the Platonist doctrines which Plotinus finds in 'Pythagoras, Pherecydes and others of their school' in early Greek philosophy, but rather in Plato, Plotinus' construction of tradition is easy to discount. Before doing so, however, we must very carefully distinguish between Plotinus' thought as the history of ideas sees it and his thought as he defines it.

A comparative instance may be helpful in this connection. Reading Origen, one might remark his deep debt to Platonist thinking, and comment that he is a Platonising Christian author; but one would never argue that 'he claims to be an orthodox Platonist', since his claims to be a Christian are undeniable. Extending this comparison, it would seem strange to argue that 'Origen says he is a Christian, but he is really a Platonist', a type of argument which Blumenthal seems to be making with regard to Platonism and Plotinus in the quotation above, in essence saying that 'Plotinus says he is a Platonist, but he is really some kind of hybrid Platonist-Aristotelean'.

One of the main criteria by which scholars identify membership in a school of thought is that of self-definition, and Platonist self-definition is heterogeneous and problematic: aside from the greater or lesser claims to an immemorial tradition of truth made by different Middle Platonists, there is the problem of the Academy, which some, such as Plutarch, sought to 'steal back' from the sceptics for the dogmatist camp,[9] while others, such as Numenius, sought to prove its utter lack of connection to Plato.[10] Unlike other recognised schools of philosophy of the time of Plotinus, the *hairesis* which we call 'Platonist' actually lacked the recognised pedigree enjoyed by the Stoic and Epicurean schools, and to a lesser degree by the Peripatetic.[11] Platonism was, in fact, somewhat *parvenu*; we first find a Platonist school of thought referred to as such (as πλατωνικοί/*platonici*) only in the second

[9] Plutarch wrote a lost 'On the Unity of the Academy' (see Brittain 2001, 225–236), and defined himself as an 'Academic' (*ibid.* 223), a label which later Platonists avoid, perhaps due to the influence of Numenius' attack on the Academics as betrayers of Plato.

[10] See p. 122.

[11] The debate over the 'unity of the Academy', which arose with Philo of Larissa and his pupil Antiochus of Ascalon (see Dillon 1982, 62 ff.; Brittain 2001, 220–254), may helpfully be seen as in part motivated by various attempts to construct such a pedigree (cf. Brittain 2001, 223). Platonism also lacked a series of *diadochoi* to give it notional continuity, and even after the founding of the official chair by Marcus Aurelius in the year 176 there seems to have been no universally recognised succession until Proclus' time (see Blumenthal 1978; Glucker 1978).

century CE.[12] Platonism was thus a strictly post-Hellenistic movement,[13] quite modern in Plotinus' time, and of course had an interest in compensating for what might be perceived as a lack of philosophic *gravitas* by positing a very august tradition for itself. Athanassiadi has discussed the struggle for 'orthodoxy' among Late Platonists;[14] we might speak as well of a struggle for *identity*.

It is right, then, to discuss Platonism and Plotinus' role in it, but wrong to say that Plotinus defines himself as a Platonist. By claiming to belong to a Platonist school, Plotinus would be making a fairly limited claim to authority; what he is in fact claiming is something much greater, a lineage with the cultural authority of Hellenism as a whole and a uniquely privileged access to truth.[15]

[12] The term πλατωνικός/*platonicus* appears earlier than this in literature (i.e. Cic. *N.D.* 1.72-3; see Brittain 2001, 223–234, n. 8) and in inscriptions (e.g. in a first-century CE inscription from Ephesus; see Runia 1988, 242–243), but Glucker persuasively argues that it does not yet refer to a philosophical *hairesis* (1978, 206–225). Numenius' reference to 'Krantor the Platonist' (fr. 25 ll. 12–13) is an example of the new meaning of the term being constructed in the second century, although Numenius was, as we have seen, concerned to identify both himself and Plato with a perennial tradition associated with Pythagoras rather than with any 'Platonism'.

[13] It may be that members of the Early Academy were Platonists in the sense defined here; this exception to the rule is worth noting, although it is irrelevant to the problem of self-definition under discussion.

[14] Athanassiadi 2006.

[15] See Banner 2015.

APPENDIX B

Esoteric Hermeneutics, Plato and Aristotle in Plotinus

Plato and the Ancients

Plato presents special hermeneutic problems for Plotinus. Plotinus sees Plato as offering different opinions on the same subject at different times;[1] while a modern reader might posit an evolution in Plato's thought, or aporetic rather than dogmatic aims on Plato's part, this option is closed to a perennialist Platonist.[2] As argued by Alain Eon, Plotinus' solution to this apparent problem lies in positing an underlying unity of thought behind apparent contradictions.[3] The question then arises: if Plato's contradictions hide an underlying knowledge, does Plotinus see this as an intentional hiding, an esotericism?

We will arrive at a positive answer to this question when we take into account Plotinus' statements that Plato, although the philosopher who excels all others in ἀκριβεῖα, is sometimes obscure,[4] that he contradicts himself,[5] and that his comments are sometimes intended to force aspiring philosophers to work for the truth rather than simply to find it laid out for them.[6] When we consider these points in conjunction with the discussion

[1] IV.8[31]1.27; cf. IV.4[28]22.12–14; III.5[36]8.7–11, where various contradictory Platonic treatments of Zeus are considered, and that of the *Philebus* accepted as 'the clearest' (σαφέστερον), in that it makes Zeus an intellect, which fits with Plotinus' own schema.

[2] There is no evidence that Plotinus saw Plato's thought as evolving over time; see p. 143. We have seen Plutarch theorise a difference in styles of esotericism between the early and late Plato, but no difference in doctrine (p. 76).

[3] The argument at Eon 1970, 264, built on statements culled throughout the *Enneads*, is worth laying out here: Plato says different things at different times (IV.8[31]1.27); he makes our *aporia* greater, not less (IV.4[28]22.12); but we know he is not just talking nonsense (III.6[1]11.34); therefore, the contradictions must be merely apparent. He has left us the task of figuring it out for ourselves, if we are to be worthy of our title [*sc.* of true philosophers] (V.8[31]4.53-54).

[4] Plato obscure and aporetic: II.9[33]1.23; IV.4[28]22.12.

[5] See n. 1.

[6] V.8[31]4.53–54. Cf. IV.8[31]1.11–17, a discussion of Heraclitus, where the possibility is raised that his obscurity 'is so that we might figure it out for ourselves', a kind of propaedeutic silence or mystification; the following remarks (IV.8[31]1.21) that Empedocles is obscure, as is Pythagoras, in

of Platonist enigma in Chapters 3 and 4 of this book , a decidedly esoteric Plato emerges from these passages of the *Enneads*, whose works conceal deeper truths from the casual reader. If this reconstruction of Platonist esotericism as understood by Plotinus is correct, it bears a methodological resemblance to the esotericisms outlined by Clement of Alexandria in the *Stromateis* and by Leo Strauss[7] – the truth is hidden in plain sight by being 'scattered' throughout a body of work, and can be reassembled only by the philosophically adept reader.

Scholars disagree as to how Plotinus' relationship with Plato ought to be defined. Some argue that Plotinus does not consider it permissible to disagree with Plato, who is seen as basically infallible,[8] while others argue for a more complex model of a respect tempered by Plotinus' philosophic originality.[9] I find the view of Alain Eon the most persuasive: Plato is authoritative but not in an absolute way, he himself being merely an exegete (albeit the most clear exegete) of the ancient tradition.[10] As Plotinus says, 'We have discussed our view of essence and how it might accord with the thought of Plato.'[11]

The way in which Plotinus needs from time to time to 'manage' awkward Platonic statements creatively in order to bring them in line with what he sees as the truth[12] support this view: Plato is, of course, never directly contradicted, but his personal philosophic choices are not the criterion of authority in themselves, but insofar as they bear witness to the ancient wisdom. Plotinus sometimes gently 'corrects' Plato, as at VI.9[9]3.43–4. Plotinus has been discussing the nature of the One, as transcending space and time, and then cites the description of the Beautiful from *Symposium* 211b1 – 'itself by itself with a single form' (μονοειδές) – and says, 'but rather without form' (μᾶλλον δὲ ἀνείδεον). When considering Plotinus' approach to Plato, then, we must take into account the fact that Plato is read as an esoteric author, *behind* whose thought lies a coherent body of doctrine, the doctrine of the Ancients.

the things he and his school has put in enigmas (ᾐνίττοντο), may be read in a similar light, especially as Plato is then mentioned (24–27) as being the most clear author on the subject under investigation, *and* as saying different things at different times.

7 See Appendix D, p. 270 ff.

8 E.g. Armstrong 1990c, 421.

9 E.g. Rist 1961, 163; Rist 1967a, 180 ff.; Dillon 1992. Gatti 1996, 18–19 gives a convenient list of references for various modern interpretative tendencies regarding Plotinus' relationship with Plato.

10 Eon 1970, 263.

11 VI.3[20]1.1–2.

12 III.4 *passim* is an extended example of Plotinus' harmonising multiple comments of Plato on the soul in order to reach a Plotinian conclusion. Cf. III.6[1]19 ff. On creative *contresens* in Plotinus see p. 142 ff.

Aristotle and the Ancients

The position of Aristotle in the *Enneads* is an excellent illustration of the way the canonicity and strong authority of the ancients can shape Plotinian argument and his approach to what he wishes to say. It is not uncommon for modern scholars to depict Plotinus as 'anti-Aristotelean',[13] and the often extended arguments against Aristotelean ideas in the *Enneads* seem to militate for such a reading. But, on the other hand, Plotinus usually employs a very careful and measured tone in his treatment of Aristotle. He often questions Aristotle's conclusions, and often attempts to make them conform to his own, and thus to the Ancients', doctrines,[14] but never as far as I can see treats them as unworthy of consideration in the way he is happy to do with Stoic or Epicurean doctrines.[15]

Our approach should be tempered by what Porphyry tells us of Peripatetic doctrines, especially doctrines drawn from the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, interspersed throughout the *Enneads,*[16] and the numerous modern scholars whose detailed investigations into Plotinus' debt to Aristotle leave no doubt of the intrinsic importance of Aristotelean ideas in Plotinus' thought.[17] We should also not ignore the statement by Hierocles of

[13] E.g. Frede 1994, 5198; Athanassiadi 2006, 94, 146–148: 'franchement hostile'.

[14] See e.g. VI.6[41]6.19–20 (with reference to *de anima* Γ 5.430a2–3 and 7.431a1–2) and I.5[36]4.3 (with reference to *Eth. Nic.* 1153b 10–12), where this process of negotiation is very clear. The former passage is a comment to the effect that Aristotle is right, provided we understand his comments (in the *de anima*) in precisely the opposite way to how he meant them! Logically, this is a statement that Aristotle is wrong; rhetorically, it is something else, a more subtle and open-ended tactic of inclusion. Cf. VI.1[42]11.23–28.

[15] *Ennead* VI.1, the first section of the large treatise *On the Kinds of Being*, is a good example of this attitude. Its first 24 chapters consist in a detailed critique of Aristotle's theory of Categories (a critique which sometimes aims to 'Platonise' the Categories rather than refuting them, as at VI.1[42]11.23–28), and the final six in a critique of the Stoic theory of types of being. While the former is definitely seen as problematic and in need of correction, the latter is repeatedly called 'absurd' (ἄτοπος), and the more cursory treatment it is given, justified on the grounds that there would be no point in attempting to defeat a manifestly absurd position (28.1 ff.). Plotinus rarely considers Epicurean views worthy of detailed consideration (e.g. III.7[45]7.15–16, where he proposes to ignore them, concentrating on views that are 'somewhat worthy of discussion' (τὰ μάλιστα ἀξίως λόγου)).

[16] *Porph.* Plot. 14, 4–7: Ἐμμέμικται δ' ἐν τοῖς συγγράμμασι καὶ τὰ Στωικὰ λανθάνοντα δόγματα καὶ τὰ Περιπατητικὰ· καταπεπύκνωται δὲ καὶ ἡ Μετὰ τὰ φυσικὰ τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους πραγματεία. The word λανθάνοντα is usually taken to refer to both the Stoic and Peripatetic doctrines here, but the syntax, and also Plotinus' and Porphyry's relationship with Aristotle, makes me wonder whether it is only the Stoic doctrines which are meant to be tacitly lurking in the *Enneads*.

[17] From an extensive literature, see, on Plotinus' reading of Aristotle generally, Eon 1970, 267–270; 282–288. Detailed studies of the transformation of Aristotelean materials in the *Enneads* include Merlan 1969; Szlezák 1979; Karamanolis 2006, 216–242. Chiaradonna 1998 provides further bibliography. Gersh sees transformations of Aristotelean doctrines as absolutely central to Late Platonist metaphysics (e.g. 1978, 28; 32–33; 45; 58; etc.).

Alexandria (fifth century) that Plotinus' teacher Ammonius Saccas himself had harmonised Plato and Aristotle.[18] Taking these testimonies into account, we might ask how it would be possible to characterise Plotinus as anti-Aristotelean at all.

The way out of this conundrum lies, firstly, in attending to the important distinction between an author's self-definition and the influences, hidden and overt, which readers may find in his work. Plotinus does indeed find many of Aristotle's ideas to be wrong; this is one point. A second point is that Plotinus is deeply indebted to aspects of Aristotle's thought. Both of these points should inform a nuanced picture of Plotinus' debt to Aristotle. But there is a third point, often underplayed or ignored, which is that Plotinus presents Aristotle as a member, albeit wayward, of the great tradition, and thus as a canonical author, with certain unwritten rules governing the way his material should be approached.

We find in Plotinus a specific criticism of Aristotle which makes good sense of that philosopher's ambivalent position vis à vis 'the tradition'; namely, his fondness for 'innovation'.[19] Understood in the light of Platonist perennialism, Plotinus' reception of Aristotle is that of a critical thinker trying to square the teachings of a student of Plato's with the master's own. On balance, Aristotle is seen by Plotinus as a somewhat backward member of the *hæresis* of the ancients, but a member all the same.[20] The lateness of Aristotle's contribution to philosophy, understood as a mark of a decadence which had occurred in the transmission of the perennial wisdom, supports this suspicion;[21] as we have seen, Plato is seen by Plotinus as the final contributor to the tradition in its purest phase.[22] The (much more virulent) attack on innovation in *Against the Gnostics* (discussed page 133 ff.) further elucidates this understanding of philosophic history in Plotinus.

[18] Hierocles ap. Phot. *Bibl.* 214 172a; see Karamanolis 2006, 191–195.
[19] See discussion at Eon 1970, 267–270; 282–288.
[20] Cf. Armstrong, discussing the long argument with Aristotle's *Categories* in *Enneads* VI.1-3: 'Aristotle is treated as if he were a bad and metaphysically unintelligent Platonist . . . ' (2003, VI, 7).
[21] Charrue 1978, 20–21.
[22] See p. 128.

APPENDIX C

Some Useful Notes on Plotinian Metaphysics

Hypostasis

The basic unit of Plotinian reality, often referred to for convenience as a 'level', is the hypostasis. For Plotinus, as is well known, there are three primary hypostases: the One or Good, which is transcendent and ineffable; *nous* or intellect, which is the 'first god', the first being, and the origin of all subsequent manifestation; and soul, the hypostasis which creates the world of bodies and the senses. This 'three hypostasis system' is the position put forth forcefully in *Against the Gnostics*, where Plotinus is concerned with refuting what he sees as unnecessary and wrong-headed multiplication of intermediaries in the schema of reality.[1]

But, while in this polemical context Plotinus makes a stand on the position of 'three hypostases', the meaning of this term in his work as a whole is more generally 'a truly real thing' and is not limited to the primary realities of the One, *nous* and soul. In modern terms, a hypostasis is something that 'really exists', rather than something which exists only in thought or appearance.[2] The term 'hypostasis' also implies eternity:[3] its nature is to exist always (although not necessarily to 'be' at all).[4] Additionally, Plotinian

[1] II.9[33]1–2; many other treatises discuss the three primary hypostases (e.g. notably V.1[10]1, V.1[10]8), but *Against the Gnostics* is unique in its insistence on 'three and *only* three' (Anton 1977, 258 n. 1).

[2] Oosthout 1991, 18–19. Anton gives further useful characterisation of the Plotinian hypostasis (Anton 1977, 258 n. 2).

[3] The difficult problem of whether this hypostatic eternity is an eternity properly so called, a *nunc stans*, or something else altogether is addressed most thoroughly by Sorabji (1983), and must be regarded as unresolved for the purposes of the present discussion. It may be said with confidence, however, that temporal statements of eternity regarding hypostases are a use of time-bound language for non-temporal realities, a problematic feature of language which Plotinus sees as a painful necessity (see p. 190).

[4] As discussed in Chapter 5 and throughout this work, the 'existence' of the highest hypostasis cannot be said to involve being, but it also cannot be said to be non-existent in the sense that it is 'unreal'.

hypostases are by definition non-extended;[5] hence bodies, with their temporal and dimensional extension, cannot by definition be hypostases. The old philosophic usage of the English 'substance', following the meaning of the scholastic Latin *substantia*, would have supplied the best single term of translation for hypostasis, but its current usage has evolved in an opposite direction from the Plotinian meaning, to indicate a physical ingredient or material.

The term 'levels of reality', while itself inadequate, is preferable to 'levels of being'; the One or Good is the primary hypostasis, but cannot be said to 'be', existing ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας.[6] In attempting to think in terms of hypostasis, it is important to try to dissociate the concept of hypostatic reality, or even 'truth' understood in a radical sense, from that of 'existence' or 'being'. This is no mean mental feat, and it is one Plotinus expends considerable energy on.

The three primary hypostases are not the only hypostases for Plotinus: light may be described as a hypostasis, as may wisdom[7] and other things that have reality. The verbal form ὑφίστημι is also used to express what we would call the 'reality' of a thing in many contexts.[8] We can thus identify a polysemantic sphere of meanings for hypostasis in Plotinus: the primary levels of reality are the most important and commonly occurring instances, but other things which are truly real may be said to be hypostases, although this does not make them basic structural components of reality.

We should thus be careful when speaking of a 'three-hypostasis cosmology' in the *Enneads* because the term hypostasis has a broader meaning than simply the three primary levels of reality. We should also beware of the convenience of such a schematised approach because the interrelations, and finally the fundamental unity, of the hypostases militate against the idea that Plotinus saw reality as a series of 'levels';[9] he saw it as a structured and dynamic unity.

[5] VI.3[20]8.35 ff; VI.9[9]6.10–12. See Rist, 1961, 161; Anton 1977, 258 n. 2.

[6] See p. 181 ff.

[7] IV.5[29]6.4 ff. (light); I.4[46]9.18 (wisdom). As noted by Oosthout 1991, 18–19.

[8] See Sleeman and Pollet 1980 *s.v.*

[9] Oosthout 1991, 17–19, following Deck 1967, 9 n. 5, points out that the usage of hypostasis primarily to indicate a 'metaphysical system' in Plotinus may owe something to the titles given to certain treatises rather than to Plotinus' writings themselves, notably those of *Enneads* V.1, Περὶ τῶν τρίων ἀρχικῶν ὑποστασέων and V.3, Περὶ τῶν γνωριστικῶν ὑποστασέων καὶ τοῦ ἐπέκεινα. These titles, as was common in antiquity, were really short descriptions originating with the reading public rather than with the author, and Porphyry tells us that his choices of title were determined by which title had gained the most currency (*Plot.* 4). They may thus preserve late antique oversimplifications similar to those used by modern interpreters; we have no reason to think that Plotinus did not know of and approve these titles (Heiser 1991, 42 n. 11), but the presentation of reality as a series of three 'levels' is atypical of the *Enneads* as a whole.

We should also use caution when speaking of the One as a hypostasis. Plotinus calls it 'hypostasis' at VI.8[39]15.30; cf. 20.11, but in a context where he has already stated that he is 'not speaking properly' (οὐκ ὀρθῶς, VI.8[39]13.1–5); elsewhere he states that it is a 'quasi-hypostasis' (VI.8[39]7.47, term coined by Deck 1967, 9 n. 5), that it precedes hypostasis (VI.8[39]10.37: πρὸ ὑποστάσεως), or 'has' hypostasis (V.6[24]3.11; VI.8[39]13.43–4). As with all attributes, 'hypostasis' can only be applied to the One provisionally or metaphorically (see page 181 ff.). Anton (1977, 261–4) argues against this position, stating that the One must be a full hypostasis with all that this entails; his argument, however, rests on the unsupported statement that 'Plotinus believes that it is impossible that contradictory statements are forthcoming when we speak correctly about the One' (259). As argued in Chapter 7, Plotinus makes many references to speaking 'incorrectly' about the One, but I find none whatever to speaking 'correctly'; kataphatic statements are always to be read as 'improper speech', and even the negative statements which Plotinus is sometimes content to make in the context of the transcendent first reality are denied the status of true statements.

The 'Law of Undiminished Giving' of Hypostasis

An important characteristic of the Plotinian hypostasis is its productive quality. A metaphysical axiom running through Plotinus' work is that simpler and more perfect realities give rise to more complex and less perfect realities; a complementary doctrine is that a producer must be, by definition, greater than its product.[10] Because it is good, every hypostasis has a kind of integral, overflowing plenitude which automatically produces images of its goodness. This 'giving rise to' is an unwilled process akin to 'generation' in the modern sense of the term; the hypostasis remains unaffected by what it produces,[11] and does not know anything about the lower ontological realities to which it gives rise.[12]

Hypostasis thus generates or produces through its own nature. A favourite image in this context for Plotinus is that of light: light is not

[10] E.g. III.8[51]8.46–8, 9.43, 10.1–19. See Wallis 1972, 61; Anton 1977, 258 n. 2; Mortley 1986, II, 47.

[11] III.8[51]8.46–48 and 10.1–19.

[12] See Anton 1977, 258 n. 2: the One is beyond knowing altogether (VI.7[38]39.19–33), but even the 'knowing hypostases' (αἱ γνωριστικαὶ ὑποστάσεις) intellect and soul know only the causal principles (*logoi*) they contain within themselves, rather than the products of these principles (IV.4[28]9.16-18; V.8[31]3.26–27). This doctrine stems most directly from Plotinus' conviction that true knowledge must be self-knowledge, and so there can be no true knowledge of that which is external. It remains controversial whether Plotinus sees the soul as generating matter itself, as opposed to the matter-Form composite which constitutes bodies: O'Brien 1981, Gerson 1994, 263–264 n. 23 argue for, Corrigan 1986 against the thesis that he does.

diminished by illuminating, but continues to be simply light, whatever its apparent extent in space.[13] Whether Plotinus intends this as a metaphor for the undiminished giving of hypostasis, like his images of radiating heat and cold,[14] or rather as a concrete example[15] (since light, as discussed, can be described as a hypostasis),[16] it is the philosopher's favourite image for the productive action of hypostasis, hence the common metaphor of 'emanation' to describe this activity.

Logos

Plotinus recognises two basic meanings of *logos*. The first is the *logos* familiar to all students of Hellenic culture, a complex term including in its semantic sphere the concepts 'speech', 'argument', 'rational account' and 'definition'.[17] The second type of *logos* in Plotinus is an immaterial metaphysical principle responsible for the formation of the universe as it is; Armstrong translates 'rational formative principle', which gives something of the flavour of what is meant.[18]

Stoicism had been the first philosophic movement to elevate *logos* to a principle of physical reality, making spoken *logos* into *logos prophorikos*, an outward expression of an innate rational principle.[19] The Stoic *logos* is of course a material principle. Plotinus is perhaps the first philosophic proponent of a *logos* fully transformed into an immaterial principle,[20] and, in terms of the history of philosophic ideas, his use of *logos* is generally seen as a development of the Stoic idea in a Platonist context,[21] with Philo of

[13] E.g. V.4[7]1.23–41; V.1[10]6.28–40; V.3[49]12.39–44. See above all Beierwaltes 1961; cf. Wallis 1972, 61; Armstrong 1967, 54–58.

[14] See Wallis 1972, 61.

[15] As argued by Beierwaltes 1961; cf. Mortley 1975, 370–371.

[16] I.6[1]3.18–19; IV.5[29]7.41; II.1[53]7.26–28.

[17] On the historical and etymological development of this term from Homer onwards, with an emphasis on philosophy, see Mortley 1986, I, 11 ff. On the Plotinian *logos* generally, see Deck 1967, 56–63.

[18] Cf. Deck 1967, 56–63.

[19] Mortley (1986, I, 16–39) discusses possible earlier appearances of *logos* as a philosophic ἀρχή, concluding that Aristotle's use of the term was especially influential in the transfer between the older Hellenic idea of *logos* as primarily an activity of speech and mind and the later idea of *logos* as a metaphysical principle (see list of Aristotelean passages *ibid.* 26–27).

[20] Witt 1931, 104–105; cf. Deck 1967, 56. As Witt notes, the *logos* had already been 'dematerialised' in some Neopythagorean speculations (citing Syrian. *in Metaph.* XIII.6, where the *logoi* of the monad give rise to number), but it is with Plotinus that we see the *logos* come into its own as a key metaphysical concept (*ibid.*).

[21] E.g. Deck 1967, 56.

Alexandria, as often, occupying an ill-defined place in the chain of development of the idea.[22] It may be that we should also take into account the influence of contemporary religious movements on Plotinus in this connection, as the widespread use of *logos* as a term for a divine entity across a broad range of Græco–Roman religious movements was already well-established by Plotinus' time. [23]

There is no doubt that *logos* is a creative or ordering principle: Plotinus makes this abundantly clear.[24] The Plotinian *logoi* in a seed are what make it grow into a particular plant; the *logoi* in *nous* make reality 'grow' into just such a reality as it is.[25] But *logos* is sometimes given an almost independent existence in the scheme of things, to the point that Armstrong was tempted to accord it the status of hypostasis,[26] while at other times it seems to be a synonym for 'that which makes, inasmuch as it makes': thus, soul is a *logos* in its function of making the cosmos.[27]

For the purposes of this work the problematic nature of the metaphysical *logos* in Plotinus may stand as an unanswered question. Its function, however, is fairly clear: the *logos* is an immaterial presence of some kind latent within a reality which causes it to flower forth in a certain way into manifestation. It is the mechanism by which the undiminished giving of hypostasis takes place.

[22] See Witt 1931.

[23] E.g. the opening lines of the biblical *Gospel of John*; the *Corpus Hermeticum* (e.g. *CH* I.6); possibly in the *Chaldæan Oracles* (fr. 186 *bis*; this may however be an importation of Platonist ideas by Olympiodorus; see note Majercik 1989, 210); Basilides *ap*. Irenæus A.H. I.24.3. Philo's development of the concept of *logos* (on which see Runia 1986, 446–51; 482–483; 505–516; Mortley 1986, I, 44) is an example of the interaction of religious and philosophic tropes which was, if anything, typical of the Alexandrian milieu where Plotinus studied, and which had only increased in the intervening years between the two thinkers.

[24] At II.7[37]3.8–10 Plotinus differentiates between the two types of *logos*, the first being a clarifying definition which tells what a thing is, and the second actually making a thing: Δεῖ δὲ τὸν λόγον τούτον, εἰ μή ἐστιν ἄλλως ὥσπερ ὁρισμὸς δηλωτικὸς τοῦ τί ἐστι τὸ πρᾶγμα, ἀλλὰ λόγος ποιῶν πρᾶγμα, κτλ.

[25] III.2[19]2.18 ff.

[26] Armstrong 1967, 98–108. See critique at Deck 1967, 63 n. 7.

[27] IV.3[27]5.

APPENDIX D

Modern Theories of Philosophic Silence

The Tübingenschule *and the (Anti-)Esotericist Debate*

The name 'Tübingen School'[1] mainly refers to a scholarly approach to Plato, rather than to later Platonists, but it is in some senses a revival of Late Platonist hermeneutics of Plato in a thoroughly modern guise, and significant for this reason to the study of Platonist philosophic silence more generally. The Tübingen reading of Plato is further significant in the context of ancient philosophic silence because it is an esotericist reading of Plato – that is to say, these scholars read Plato as though he did indeed write *more Platonico*,[2] hiding at least some of his true doctines – and is thus embroiled in the problematics of the self-hiding secret, one of the major interpretative difficulties when dealing with Platonist philosophic silence.

As mentioned above, the idea that Plato wrote in this way, hiding his true doctrine in some fashion, has been an assumption of many, or even most readers since late antiquity until the eighteenth century,[3] and it has only been with the advent of the modern analytical approach that this reading has been widely called into question. Harold Cherniss took an influential reductionist stance on which sources of evidence are admissible in attempting to discern what Plato meant to say:[4] Cherniss maintains, essentially, that only the dialogues themselves should be considered as

[1] Tigerstedt 1977 gives a summary of the development of the Tübingen position from a strongly opposed viewpoint. Gaiser 1980, 7–8 gives a summary of the 'Tübingen project' from the perspective of one of its supporters. For a fairly broad summary of the debate from neither 'side', see Müller 1993.

[2] See p. 28.

[3] See previous note. Cf. Tigerstedt 1974, 57 ff.

[4] Cherniss 1945, in Part One: 'Plato's Lectures: A Hypothesis for an Enigma' (1–30); notable expansions of and supporting arguments for Cherniss' basic position are Vlastos 1963; Tigerstedt 1977. The enterprise of separating Plato from his interpreters, and from the evidence for unwritten doctrines, can be traced back to Schleiermacher.

evidence of Plato's views. The 'Esoterics', on the other hand, argue that the strong testimony of Aristotle and others that the lecture 'On the Good' presented an oral component of Plato's teaching cannot be ignored.[5] Insofar as regards the history of Platonist interpretation, this is certainly true; as Chapter 2 of the present work emphasises, the Platonic 'oral teaching' had a long interpretative life in later Platonist metaphysics, and served as a thematic locus for Platonist silence.

It is impossible to say with precision when the reputation of Plato as an author with a secret teaching arose. Tigerstedt has correctly pointed out that there is no direct evidence for the idea of a secret Platonic doctrine before the imperial period,[6] a fact which he adduces to a thoroughgoing argument against a secret Platonic doctrine. Ignoring the question of the historicity of the secret doctrines, however, it is tempting to date the *idea* that Plato had such a secret teaching to at least the Hellenistic period; the reductionist view of the evidence may be questioned on a number of points, none of which is individually conclusive, but which may cumulatively lead one to doubt Tigerstedt's late dating for the idea of the secret doctrines.

Firstly, of course, the Platonic materials surveyed in Chapter 2 undoubtedly evoke the idea of hidden teachings, and of philosophy as an initiatory matter between teacher and student; this may or may not mean that Plato had his own secret teachings which he taught orally in the Academy, but it makes it difficult to see how the idea that Plato had a secret doctrine could *not* have arisen almost immediately. Another problem with the absolute denial of an early date for the idea of the Platonic secret teaching is that it supposes that it sprang fully formed, like Athena, from the heads of such authors as Cicero (1st C. BCE)[7] and Josephus (1st C. CE)[8] with little or no historical evolution beforehand.

We also have fairly early testimony to the intriguing tradition, which had a long life in antiquity, that the sceptical Academy had a hidden Platonic doctrine at its core. This idea was maintained by one Diocles of Cnidus

[5] For major contributions to this interpretative stance see especially Krämer 1959; Gaiser 1963; Szlezák 1978.

[6] Tigerstedt 1977, 64–65. Cf. Boas 1953. Both scholars make the point that the ἄγραφα δόγματα referred to by Aristotle (see n. 131) need not have been *secret* doctrines merely because they were *unwritten* doctrines.

[7] Cicero (*R.* I.10) has Scipio recount a tradition of the influences at work in Plato's philosophy: *Itaque cum Socratem unice dilexisset eique omnia tribuere voluisset; leporem socraticum subtilitatemque sermonis cum obscuritate Pythagorae et cum plurimarum artium gravitate contexuit*. The Pythagorean *obscuritas* referred to could mean 'obscurity', but could also have the sense of intentional secretiveness (see p. 117). See Bremmer 1995, 70.

[8] *Ap.* 2. 224–225: Plato hid the truth about god for fear of the mob.

(3rd C. BCE), who claimed that Arcesilaus, the founder of the sceptical Academy, imparted the doctrines of Plato to an inner circle while hiding behind a false front of 'suspension of belief',[9] an idea also familiar to Numenius, who doubts it in the case of Arcesilaus, but seems to accept it in the case of Carneades.[10] This idea also appears in a different form as late as Augustine, who saw the esoteric teaching of the Sceptical Academy as a relatively praiseworthy affair, allowing for the doctrine of immaterial substances to be transmitted underground during the ascendency of Stoic materialism, later to re-emerge into the light of day.[11] The idea of a secret Academic tradition, which we can trace back to the heyday of the sceptical Academy itself, must have arisen from somewhere; the two most obvious places are 1: from the Academy itself (i.e., that the sceptics really were secret Platonists *avant la lettre*), or 2: as an extrapolation from the esoteric materials in Plato's own works (i.e., through a conviction that any tradition stemming from Plato *must* have a secret teaching, whatever its protestations of sceptical suspension of judgement). The second option seems the more plausible, which would again support the likelihood of an early belief in a secret Platonic teaching – a belief, in fact, in a secret Platonist tradition.

The tangled weighing of complex evidence which underlies these discussions vis à vis Plato himself is not of direct relevance to the present thesis (and probably cannot be settled in a way that will convince a majority of scholars),[12] but two main points of this debate are germane to philosophic silence: Plato's own statements that his true doctrine was not suitable for writing down (expressed most strongly in *Ep.* VII, which may or may not be genuine,[13] but consonant with many passages in the dialogues emphasising the need for long training between a teacher and student before the higher truths of philosophy are broached),[14] and the

[9] S.E. *P.* I.234.

[10] See Num. fr. 25 ll. 62–68. Numenius cites Diocles on Arcesilaus the Academic scholarch, but thinks that Arcesilaus was actually what he claimed to be, a detestable (in Numenius' eyes) sceptic with no doctrines. In fr. 27.56-9, Numenius says of Carneades: 'Carneades, in forming a philosophy from diametrically opposed principles, as it were, adorned himself with lies and concealed the truth with them. Thus he used the lies as curtains and spoke the truth within unnoticed, in a rather mercenary fashion.' It would seem that Numenius regards Carneades as genuinely possessing an esoteric hidden doctrine, but that this doctrine, although 'true', is somehow worthless. The humorous and allusive style of the work from which this passage is taken, *On the Academy's Abandonment of Plato* (see p. 122), makes it difficult to judge just how we are to construe this take on Carneades, but Numenius is certainly arguing for some kind of esoteric doctrine.

[11] *Contr. Ac.* 3.37–43.

[12] Cf. Müller 1993, 117; 127; for a discussion of 'ways forward' given the divided *status quæstionis*, see Gill 1993.

[13] See n. 121.

[14] See p. 65 ff.

problematic issue of the Platonic lecture 'On the Good'. The contemporary or near-contemporary reports of this lecture seem to contradict the esoteric principles derived from the Platonic Epistles and dialogues mentioned above; the 'riddle' of the lecture itself, as to why Plato's innermost doctrines could be unsuitable to be written down, but could appropriately be delivered to a random and sometimes unfriendly audience, presents, in terms of Late Platonist reading, a structural paradox of hiding and revealing.[15]

This debate is interesting to the historian of philosophic silence for a number of reasons. While the foregoing condensed survey might give the impression that the Esotericist school supports a reading of Plato similar to that propounded by Plotinus and the Late Platonists, the interpretations of this school are in fact fully within the fold of modern source-critical philosophy, and, if anything, strive more strenuously than the anti-Esotericists to free Plato of the charge of having propounded the idea that his teaching might be ἀπόρρητον in the sense of 'ineffable'. There is sometimes even an ironic inversion of what might be the expected interpretative stance; the Esotericist position tends to read the Seventh Epistle as having no reference to ideas of ineffability, and may even accuse the anti-Esotericist of propounding a 'mystical' and thoroughly outmoded Plato who spoke of an ineffable truth.[16]

Tigerstedt's polemical claim that the Esotericists are '. . . essentially identical with Neoplatonism' in their reading of Plato ignores the details of their respective readings.[17] Plato's secrecy, for the Tübingen scholars, is firmly the elitist secrecy of a knowledge which is useless or dangerous in the wrong hands, or at the wrong stage in a student's development, rather than a knowledge which cannot by its nature be expressed in words.[18] It is, more importantly, an open secret; the Esotericists claim to see behind the screen of Plato's secrecy an ontological doctrine, one which can be expressed in fairly straightforward terms; they thus present themselves as penetrating the rhetoric of secrecy and presenting, in an open way, Plato's true doctrine,[19] while, for Plotinus and the late antique Platonists, this doctrine

[15] Cf. Guthrie 1975, 424–426; Gaiser 1980, 6–7.

[16] Gaiser 1980, 27, and n. 81, against Cherniss 1945, 13. Cherniss does not, *pace* Gaiser, propound such a Plato in this passage but he does state that the Seventh Epistle, if taken literally, would logically lead one to abandon the quest for an open doctrine to be found in Plato's works.

[17] Tigerstedt 1977, 63.

[18] See e.g. Krämer 1959, 25ff; 401; 457; Gaiser 1980, 14, and n. 31; 27.

[19] See, e.g. Gaiser 1980, 8: 'We hold the view that Plato intended a systematic synthesis and grounding of his entire thought with this theory of first principles, which is only hinted at in the dialogues.'

is simply not susceptible to such presentation, being a doctrine of transcendence, and thus self-hiding. The Esotericists thus actually share the reading of the late antique Platonists only insofar that they insist that Plato was hiding something.

The implications of the rhetorics of secrecy present in Plato's text will not leave matters this simple, however. We may note that, in presenting Plato's inner teaching, the Tübingen scholars presumably make one of two judgements: either the judgement that modern audiences are somehow more ready to receive the Platonist doctrines than ancient ones were (the 'arrogance of interpretation'),[20] or that Plato was wrong to hide his doctrine from the masses. Either way, we can see the dialectic of hiding and revealing at work even in the Tübingen discourse which seeks nominally to free Plato's 'Esotericism' from charges of 'esotericism', for these scholars are themselves breaking the silence which Plato saw fit to establish, much as Plotinus, in evoking the enigmatic meaning of the mystery injunction to silence and then revealing its true nature as a philosophic doctrine, betrays the mysteries even as he invokes their authority.[21]

Straussian Esotericism (and Exotericism)

In an article written in the nineteen-twenties, but not published until nineteen eighty-six, the critic and political philosopher Leo Strauss outlined the theory of what he called 'exoteric writing', based on the work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.[22] This was a practice of esoteric (by the working definition outlined page 22) discourse whereby a philosopher wrote a public text, but hid uncomfortable truths within that text to avoid persecution by the unphilosophic masses, a practice of 'writing between the lines'.[23] Strauss gives Plato as an example: in the *Gorgias* (160) Socrates expresses a belief in post-mortem punishments for those who have acted badly during their lives, a belief which Strauss considers Plato did not hold.[24] He further outlined this theory in the book *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1988), in which he gives concrete examples of how this esotericism is supposed to work, using Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* as his source: a writer will signal his hidden subtext through the deliberate use of contradiction of various kinds (70–71), the exploitation of ambiguities (71–73),

[20] See p. 140.
[21] See p. 8 ff.
[22] Strauss 1986.
[23] *Ibid.* 52.
[24] *Ibid.* 54.

and, sometimes, by methodological statements.[25] Strauss finds such statements in Lessing[26] and Spinoza, who differentiates between *pia dogmata* and *vera dogmata*, the former leading to obedience in the many and the latter expressing the truth to the few.[27]

A passage from Clement of Alexandria seems to provide us with an example of a 'Straussian' method of writing in action.[28] In the *Stromateis*, a work conspicuously lacking in method and organisation, Clement tells us that his style is deliberately unsystematic:

> Some [matters] I am deliberately putting to one side, making my selection scientifically out of fear of writing what I have refrained from speaking – not in a spirit of grudging (that would be wrong), but in fear that my companions might misunderstand them and go astray and that I might be found offering a dagger to a child.[29]

All of the elements of Strauss' theory seem to be present here: the author's advice to the attentive reader that there is a hidden, scattered subtext to his work, and the belief on the author's part that certain matters may do more harm than good in the hands of the unprepared or unphilosophic reader. While not seemingly in fear of persecution, Clement certainly wrote in an environment where the strictures of competing claims to 'orthodoxy' were increasingly colouring the intellectual climate; a certain care in expressing one's ideas was the order of the day.

The model of an esotericism practised through the 'scattering' of statements of truth throughout a text, to be unearthed by the attentive reader with the proper hermeneutic keys, is found by Stroumsa in a range of Patristic writings as well as Maimonides, and informs, according to his analysis, the readings of scripture practised by these authors. Although Stroumsa does not reference Strauss, the methodologies outlined are similar.[30]

As this thesis argues, this kind of esotericism is not referred to explicitly in the Platonist tradition before Numenius, who himself attributes it to Plato (see page 74). But in the case of Plato we run up against the major

[25] Cf. 1986, 54, where Strauss outlines seven methodological points of 'exoteric' writing.

[26] 1986, 52: 'In short, Lessing was the last writer who revealed, while hiding them, the reasons compelling wise men to hide the truth: he wrote between the lines about the art of writing between the lines.'

[27] *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Cap. 14 para. 20 Bruder, cited at Strauss 1986, 59.

[28] Cf. Mortley 1986, II, 37; Hägg 2006, 124–125, who does not mention Strauss, but discusses a similar methodology of 'scattering' the truth in Clement's *Stromateis*.

[29] *Strom.* I.14.3, trans. Hägg 2006, 69.

[30] 1996a, 114–117; 124–126, discussing Clement of Alexandria (114–117), Origen (124–126) and Maimonides (125).

drawback of Strauss' theory: in lieu of a methodological statement on the author's part such as we have in Clement, the claim that an author used Strauss' art of esoteric writing is unfalsifiable. In Plato's case, the debates of the Esotericist and anti-Esotericist camps have shown the degree to which, in such questions of interpretation, universally convincing findings are simply out of the question; it is up to the judgement of the reader to decide whether an author is using contradictions and ambiguities to reveal to the attentive reader a hidden subtext.

It is, however, clear is that Platonists sometimes read their sources as though they had been written by authors more or less in the Straussian mould. Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs* is a striking example not covered in this book, as it postdates Plotinus: Porphyry notes that the Homeric passage under discussion (*Od.* 13 96–112) is strange and out of place (*de antr.* 4), and takes this as a sign that it must hide a philosophic subtext. There is no suggestion that Homer is seeking to escape persecution for his beliefs, but the supposed methodology of flagging an esoteric passage through incongruity is quite Straussian.

Jacques Derrida and the Post-modern Rise of Apophaticism

There are certain modern thinkers for whom the nature of language is itself intrinsically apophatic, in that the actual meaning or bedrock of signification can never be found in any given word except by means of further words.[31] Jacques Derrida's work is the most prominent example of this stance, and his essay, *Comment ne pas parler? Dénégations*,[32] which addresses the apophatic tradition specifically and constitutes one of the most penetrating and challenging treatments of the genre, has sparked a great deal of interest in this type of writing. The deconstructionist literature pioneered by Derrida, like apophatic language, is painfully self-referential and recursive; continually distrustful of its own truth-value, it seeks constantly to revise its own statements as soon as they are made. Such an approach serves as a structural reminder to the reader that statements are tentative, and never, by their nature, able to pin down any meaning-event in a conclusive way.

This would seem at first glance to be a possible way around the problem noted by Sells,[33] that the commentator on apophatic texts is always faced with the same problems which the original text contains, namely the

[31] See Franke 2005.
[32] Derrida 1987; published in English as 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' (1992).
[33] See n. 51.

prohibition of normal predicates. With Derrida we see a repositioning of this problem as, in fact, a salutary characteristic of apophatic text which bears imitating; deconstruction wholeheartedly imports these problems into scholarly discourse, and in fact expands their scope to the whole gamut of the linguistic field. The problem is thus no longer: How does one 'translate' apophatic statements into normal, scholarly discursive writing? It becomes instead: How does one make sense of the scholarly writing, or any writing, itself?

This intentional unintelligibility is a problem; not one, but several book-length treatments of this single, relatively short, essay of Derrida's have appeared, attempting to contextualise the work in Derrida's oeuvre as a whole, to flesh out its discussions with other references to the apophatic tradition, but, most basically, to explain what the essay *means*.[34] Derrida does not elucidate the meaning of apophatic texts, but supplies a proxy text (an intertext, in his own terminology) through which modern readers may choose to approach the original text (in the same way as he approaches Late Platonism via the intertextual route of Saussure, Heidegger, *et al.*), removing analysis a whole step from its subject, and bringing that subject no closer to analysis. This makes his work problematic for use in traditional humanistic scholarship, but it is at the same time clear that this work represents a genuine advance toward appreciating apophatic language, which can at any rate only be partially addressed through an analytical approach.

Read as performative text, the negations of the theologians in Derrida are viewed from a radically contrasting direction from the analytical approach common in the study of Classical philosophy; their propositional value, or their coherence vis à vis chains of reasoning which are to be found in the history of philosophical debate, are an accidental characteristic relative to their defining attribute of being speech-acts which exist only inasmuch as they are read.

[34] E.g. Coward and Foshay 1992; Sneller 1998. See Gersh 2010, 106–116 for a relatively straightforward interpretation of Derrida's 'arguments' with regard to negative theology.

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